

**Accel World, Vol.
23:
Kuroyukihime's
Confession**

**Reki Kawahara
HIMA**

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Caliente.COM

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA

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23

KUROYUKIHIME'S CONFESSION

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▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD** 23

**KUROYUKIHIME'S
CONFESSION**



REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**



MIHAYA KAKEI
Blood Unleashed

FUKO KURASAKI
Sky Raker

YUME YURUKI
Plum Flipper

SHIHOKO NAGO
Chocolate Puppeteer

"Our new mission is to subjugate the Sun God Inti."

RUI ODAGIRI
Magenta Scissor

SATOMI MITO
Mint Millen

CHIYURI KURASHIMA
Lime Bell

AKIRA HIMI
Aqua Current

UI>FU, YOU SEEM LIKE A TEACHER SOMEHOW.

TAKUMU MAYUZUMI
Cyan Pile

UTAI SHINOMIYA
Ardor Maiden



"Uh, um,
uhhh..."

HARUYUKI

Boy in the lowest school caste.
Member of the new Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.

KUROYUKIHIME

Legion Master of the new Nega Nebulus.
Vice president of the Umesato Junior High
student council.
Duel avatar: Black Lotus.

"Now then, will you
wash my back for
me? Master's orders."



MEGUMI WAKAMIYA

Close with student council vice president, Kuroyukihime.
Works as the student council secretary.
Duel avatar: Orchid Oracle.

Duel avatar and Enemy list

Legions of Pure Color

Black Legion: Nega Nebulus

Master: Black Lotus (Kuroyukihime)

Submaster: Scarlet Rain (Yuniko Kozuki)

Executive branch name: Four Elements

Wind: Sky Raker (Fuko Kurasaki)

Fire: Ardor Maiden (Utai Shinomiya)

Water: Aqua Current (Akira Himi)

Lime Bell (Chiyuri Kurashima)

Cyan Pile (Takumu Mayuzumi)

Silver Crow (Haruyuki Arita)

Chocolat Puppeter (Shihoko Nago)

Mint Mitten (Satomi Mito)

Plum Flipper (Yume Yuruki)

Magenta Scissor (Rui Odagiri)

Trilead Tetroxide

Executive branch name: Triplex

No. 1: Blood Leopard (Mihaya Kakei)

No. 2: Cassis Moose

No. 3: Thistle Porcupine

Blaze Heart

Peach Parasol

Ochre Prison

Mustard Salticid

Ash Roller (Rin Kusakabe)

Bush Utan

Olive Grab

Temporarily
transferred from
Great Wall

Blue Legion: Leonids

Master: Blue Knight

Executive branch name: Dualis

Cobalt Blade (Koto Takanouchi)

Manganese Blade (Yuki Takanouchi)

Frost Horn

Tourmaline Shell

Green Legion: Great Wall

Master: Green Grandé

Executive branch name: Six Armors

First seat: Graphite Edge

Second seat: Viridian Decurion

Third seat: Iron Pound

Fourth seat: Lignum Vitae

Fifth seat: Suntan Chafer

Sixth seat: ???

Jade Jailer

Yellow Legion: Crypt Cosmic Circus

Master: Yellow Radio

Lemon Pierette

Sax Loader

Purple Legion: Aurora Oval

Master: Purple Thorn

Executive branch name: ???

Aster Vine

White Legion: Oscillatory Universe

Master: White Cosmos

Executive branch name: Seven Dwarves

No. 1: Platinum Cavalier

No. 2: Snow Fairy

No. 3: Rose Milady

No. 4: Ivory Tower

No. 5: ???

No. 6: ???

No. 7: Glacier Behemoth

Shadow Cloaker

Other Legions

Acceleration Research Society

Black Vise

Argon Array

Dusk Taker (Seiji Nomi)

Rust Jigsaw

Sulfur Pot

Wolfram Cerberus (Armor of Catastrophe Mark II)

Computation and Martial Arts Research Club

Aluminum Valkyrie (Chiaki Chigira)

Orange Raptor (Yuko Hori)

Violet Dancer (Kurumi Kuruma)

Iris Alice (Lilya Usachova)

Affiliation unknown

Avocado Avoider

Nickel Doll

Sand Duct

Crimson Kingbolt

Lagoon Dolphin (Ruka Asato)

Coral Merrow (Mana Itosu)

Orchid Oracle (Megumi Wakamiya)

Tin Writer

Enemies

Four Divines

Archangel Metatron (Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth)

Amaterasu (Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth)

???

???

Four Gods of the Four Gates

East gate: Seiryu

West gate: Byakko

South gate: Suzaku

North gate: Genbu

Eight Gods of the Shrine of the Eight Divines

???

Sealed Enemies

Goddess Nyx (Yoyogi Park Underground Labyrinth)

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KUROYUKIHIME'S CONFESSION

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



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NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 23
REKI KAWAHARA

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Cover art by HIMA

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level six).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level five).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level six).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

■ **Normal Duel Field** = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.

■ **Movement Control System** = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.

■ **Image Control System** = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.

■ **Armor of Catastrophe** = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.

■ **Star Caster** = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.

■ **ISS kit** = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to access the Incarnate System. When the kit is used, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World. They are the greatsword *Impulse*, the staff *Tempest*, the large shield *Strife*, the Luminary (form unknown), the straight sword *Infinity*, the full-body armor *Destiny*, and the *Fluctuating Light* (form unknown).

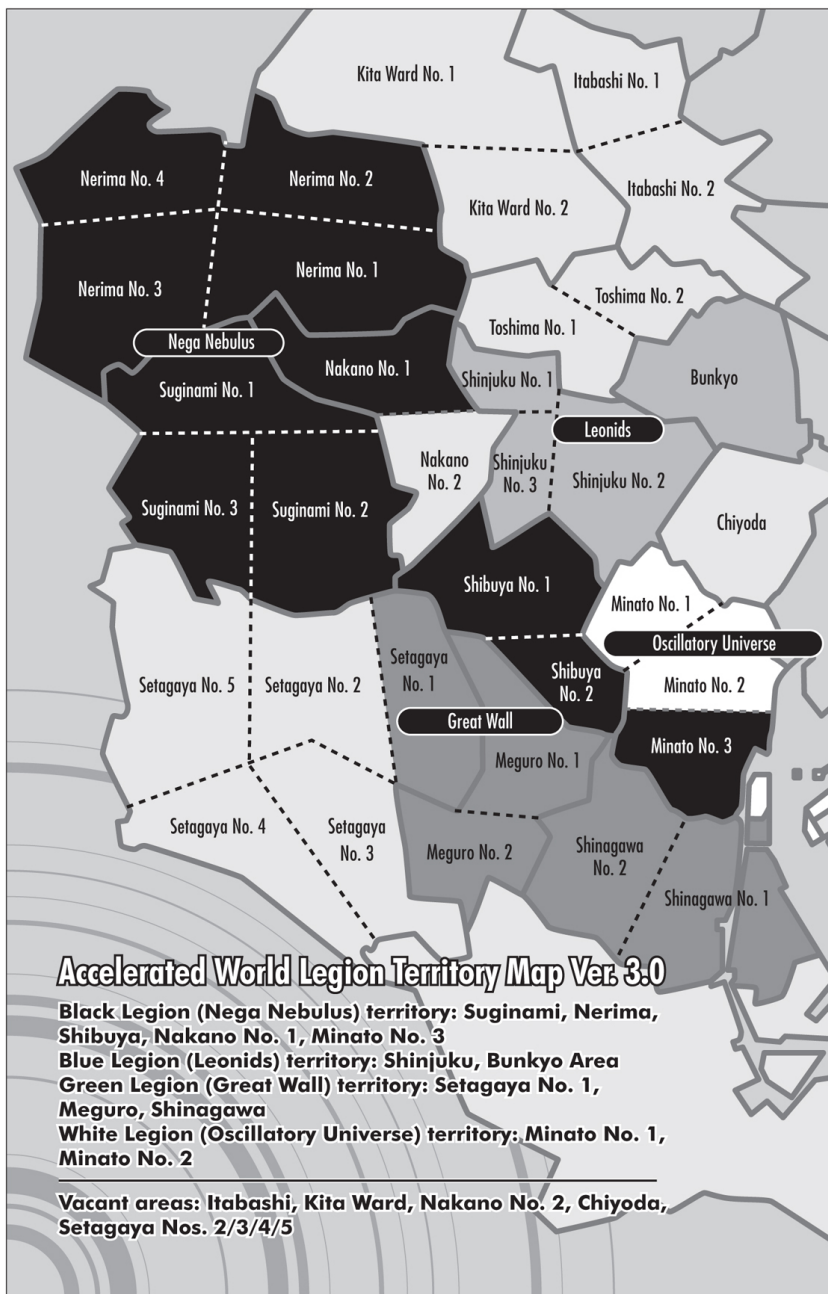
■ **Mental-Scar Shell** = The emotional scars that are the foundation of a duel avatar (mental scars created from trauma in early childhood)—this is the shell enveloping them. Children with exceptionally hard and thick “shells” are said to produce metal-color duel avatars.

■ **Artificial metal color** = Refers to a metal-color avatar that is not generated naturally from the subject's mental scars, but rather produced artificially by a third party through the thickening of the Mental-Scar Shell.

■ Unlimited EK = Abbreviation for Unlimited Enemy Kill. The subject avatar is killed by a powerful Enemy in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and each time they regenerate (after a fixed period of time), they are killed again by that Enemy, falling into an infinite hell.

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“Please... Would you stay with me tonight?”

It took a few seconds after the words reached his ears for them to mean something. Normally, at that moment, Haruyuki would have jumped like a frightened piglet and tried to run away, squeaking a string of nonsensical syllables. But now, two pale arms wrapped around him from behind and held him tightly in place. And even if Kuroyukihime hadn't been holding him fast, the tremor in her voice told him she was keeping back tears, a thought that dug deep into his heart. He couldn't breathe, much less move.

I knew it. She was only pretending to be okay.

His mind on the verge of whiting out completely, Haruyuki carefully expelled the air in his lungs, then he took a deep, slow breath. His heart beat faster with every passing second, and his hands were totally numb, but he still managed to turn his head to look back at his one and only swordmaster—the head of the Legion Nega Nebulus and his Brain Burst parent, Kuroyukihime.

“Yes, of course,” he said, putting his whole being into the words. “If there's anything I can do for you... Anything...”

Now it was Kuroyukihime's turn to fall silent, but when she did speak again after a few seconds, she sounded a bit more collected. “Thanks. I'm a little surprised, though. I assumed you would race home at a speed on par with Silver Crow.”

“O-oh.” He laughed. “I'm a little surprised myself.”

“I guess you're not going to stay the person I first met forever, are you?” Moving her hands up to his shoulders, she turned him around. Above him, her black eyes glittered like crystals, with the faintest hint of wetness clinging to her long eyelashes. She smiled fondly.

“Well, then how about we dig into the dinner you were kind enough to bring me? I'll warm up the soup, so why don't you plate everything up?”

Eating alone at home, he wouldn't have bothered putting things on separate plates. But when he piled everything up on the expensive-

looking oval platter Kuroyukihime pulled out, the ready-made meal looked 50 percent more delicious.

The two of them set out the dishes on the small dining table and sat across from each other, just as they had when he'd visited the town house exactly a month earlier during the *Armor of Catastrophe* issue. The corners of their mouths turned up when their eyes met.

The last time he'd been here, Kuroyukihime had asked whether he preferred Japanese or Western-style food, and then they had feasted on a couple of the expensive dinners she kept stuffed in her freezer in paper boxes. The meal itself had been delicious—he'd had absolutely no complaints—but when he thought about her eating from those boxes by herself every day, he felt something tug at his chest.

Ever since, Haruyuki had held Nega Nega Nebulus dinner parties in the living room of the Arita house under some pretext or another, with help from Chiyuri and Takumu. He was happy enough to see Kuroyukihime chat excitedly with Fuko, Utai, and Akira as she exhibited a surprising gluttonous streak, but, in the end, perhaps that was just his own self-satisfaction, because there was nothing he could do to help her with the complicated family situation that had put her in this town house by herself.

Haruyuki pushed back the lump in his chest and joined Kuroyukihime in expressing his appreciation for the dinner before them, and then reached a hand toward the steaming bowl of soup. As he sipped it, careful not to make a sound, the rich flavor of consommé filled his mouth.

"Oh, this is amazing," he said.

Kuroyukihime blinked in surprise before giggling. "Is it? I'm glad. I just opened a can and heated it up in a pot, though."

"Uh, um," he said, fumbling for words. "Maybe it tastes so good because you used a pot instead of the microwave."

"But it's an induction stove, so it's still heated with the electricity. Ohh, darn it. I should have said I warmed it up with the force of my will," Kuroyukihime said, a rare joke, and Haruyuki laughed out loud.

He took another sip of his soup and was struck by a thought. "Maybe it's impossible to physically raise the temperature like that. But I think that kind of thing does actually exist."

"That kind of thing?" She raised an eyebrow in his direction. "You mean, willpower?"

"Yeah. Auntie Momoe—Chiyuri's mom—used to say you can use the exact same ingredients and prepare two meals the exact same way, but the meal made with love is gonna taste better. I was pretty cynical as a kid—maybe I still am—but anyway, I had my doubts when she said that."

Holding the soup cup in his hands, Haruyuki could feel the heat

coming through the porcelain as he carefully put his thoughts into words.

"I guess cooking with love just means you're thinking fondly of the person who's going to eat your food. You wouldn't be all robotic about it. So even if the cook wasn't aware that that's what they were doing, the sentiment might show itself in little ways, like adding more or less spice, or heating the food to the exact right temperature. It isn't like the Accelerated World's Incarnate System. You can't make outrageous things happen with little more than a mental image. But if your feelings have an effect on how something turns out, maybe that's Incarnate, too, in a way."

"Mmm." Kuroyukihime looked just a little surprised for some reason and dropped her gaze to her soup cup. "Now that you mention it, when I was heating this up, maybe I *was* thinking that I shouldn't make it too hot... so that the careless Haruyuki wouldn't burn his mouth."

"Oh! R-really? Well, thank you for your consideration." Haruyuki shrank into himself, while Kuroyukihime again smiled brightly.

"I see. It may well indeed be that just the tiniest bit of Incarnate power is at work in this soup as well. But then the same could be said about the food you brought, Haruyuki. It's not as though you unthinkingly selected it at random, yes?"

"Huh?" The unexpected question forced him to look down at the table.

Cobb salad, squash croquettes, and salmon rillettes were portioned out on the oval platter, while the tortilla rolls and sandwiches on baguettes were arranged on another, smaller plate, and the lemon tart for dessert was chilling in the refrigerator. Naturally, he hadn't just grabbed them off the shelf at random. Since he didn't know what food Kuroyukihime liked, he'd thought about what sorts of things she might want before choosing these dishes. He still didn't know whether he'd been right or wrong, though.

"Uh, um, well," he stammered. "You seem like you usually eat a lot of vegetables, so I sort of went in that direction."

"Thank you. Everything looks delicious. And I'll take this opportunity to tell you that there's no food I particularly dislike. If pressed, I would say I'm not the biggest fan of squid-ink pasta. As a child, I was scolded quite harshly if I was ever fussy about food. Maybe as a reaction to that, I also don't have any real favorites, either."

"Y-you don't...?"

I figured I'd hit on at least one of her favorites if I bought this much stuff, though.

Perhaps reading his thoughts, Kuroyukihime smiled wryly. "I just

said I don't dislike anything, didn't I? All right. As of today, the dishes here will be my favorites."

"Wh-what?!"

"Now why don't we dig in? You must be hungry, too." She picked up her fork and brought some of the Cobb salad to her mouth.

The instant Haruyuki saw her do this, a gentle rumbling came from the vicinity of his stomach.

She was right—it *had* been a rough one. On this first day of summer break, July 21, Haruyuki had tackled a mountain of homework in the morning, and then moved to the Chiyoda Ward in Fuko's car, where he had attended the year's fourth meeting of the Seven Kings. There, they had pinned down Ivory Tower, the full proxy of the White King, and succeeded in making him admit the evil acts of Oscillatory Universe, just as they'd planned. Or so he'd thought for a fleeting moment before Wolfram Cerberus stepped out of the shadows of the stage and dragged everyone present into the Unlimited Neutral Field. Haruyuki had fought a fierce battle against Argon Array and Shadow Cloaker from the Acceleration Research Society, and then after all that...

He squeezed his eyes shut to cut off this train of thought. Grabbing his fork, he skewered a squash croquette and bit into it. The savory morsel still had a crunchy mouthfeel even though it had been cooked a while ago, likely because of the large bread crumbs that coated it. He delighted in the breading's contrast with the smoothness of the squash puree. He polished one off in the blink of an eye and then lifted his face to meet Kuroyukihime's cheerful eyes.

"Is it good?"

"Yes!" As he nodded, Haruyuki felt something rise up in his chest once more, and he took a gulp of soup from his cup.

"Hot!" he yelped, his throat suddenly burning. He cooled the inside of his mouth and esophagus with the ice that Kuroyukihime hurriedly proffered with a sigh.

"Honestly. Of course it's going to be hot when you take a big swig like that. You're as careless as ever, aren't you?"

"Eh-heh-heh." Laughing in embarrassment, he started in on the salmon rilette. Apparently, this was normally spread on a piece of baguette or a cracker, but the rilette Haruyuki bought was on bite-size pieces of chicory leaf, so it was a bit like eating a salad. Raw chicory was very bitter, but this wasn't a concern paired with the rich rilette.

"Mmm. This is tasty, too. You know some pretty good shops, Haruyuki," Kuroyukihime commented as she took a bite of some rilette at the same time.

"No, this was actually my first time going to this place." Haruyuki

ducked his head. "I don't normally get takeout like this."

"Ha-ha! I suppose not."

"Oh! But lately I've been wanting to learn to cook for myself, so I'm buying ingredients and things at the supermarket. I can only make simple dishes so far, though," he added.

"... Oh-ho." The smile disappeared from her face. "What sort of recipes can you make, for instance?"

"Hyah?!" He jumped in his seat. "Uh, um, recently, I made a vegetable stir-fry, *chahan* fried rice, spaghetti with tomato sauce... I was thinking maybe it was time for me to tackle curry, but peeling potatoes is surprisingly hard."

"... Oh-ho-ho." Her face serious, Kuroyukihime glanced at her hands for some reason before piling on another question. "Why on earth did you suddenly awaken to the delights of cooking? Do you have some specific reason?"

"Um. It's nothing in particular. I was just, like, 'eating only frozen pizza can't be good for me,'" he recalled, though the truth was that he actually *did* have a reason. But he couldn't confess it to *her* of all people. Not until the day came when she could actually taste the fruits of his labor.

"I see. Well, it is true that cooking for yourself is usually healthier than eating packaged food all the time," Kuroyukihime replied, accepting his words at face value, and cleared her throat before continuing. "The truth is, Haruyuki, I, too have recently..." She trailed off.

"You've recently what?" he asked.

"Unh, aah, no, it's nothing." She shook her head.

"Wh-whaaaat?!"

"Don't concern yourself with it," she told him. "Mmm. This burrito is delicious."

The two of them chatted about this and that as they steadily emptied the plates. He thought he'd bought more than enough, but before he knew it, the large platter and the soup had been devoured. All that was left was a lone sandwich on the smaller plate.

"Haruyuki, you go ahead and eat that." Kuroyukihime pushed the plate toward him.

"What? No, it's yours." He nudged it back in her direction.

"You're a growing boy. Don't be shy."

"Y-you're only a year older than me, though." And then he had a sudden thought. "Oh! Then how about we do this? We'll have a direct-duel, and the winner gets to eat the sandwich."

Haruyuki came up with this strategy because Kuroyukihime wasn't the sort to hold back in a duel, and so she would definitely get the last bite. He started to pull an XSB cable out of his pocket before it

finally hit him.

She was in no mental state to casually duel. It had only been mere hours ago that Black Lotus's avatar was caught in the White Legion's trap. System-wise, this put absolutely no restrictions on her participation in normal duels, including direct duels, or in the Territories. The imprisonment would cause no real issues in her carrying out her duties as a Legion Master.

But just as Kuroyukihime herself had once said, the true nature and heart of Brain Burst 2039 was the Unlimited Neutral Field. That was the true Accelerated World. But if she uttered the Unlimited Burst command now, Black Lotus would appear inside of the Legend-class Enemy, the Sun God Inti, and die instantly due to the superheated flames, hot enough to melt even steel. It was a completely perfect Unlimited EK, surpassing even the altars of the Four Gods where Ardor Maiden and Aqua Current had been sealed away.

The reason he'd come over to her town house bearing provisions in the first place was because he was worried she might be depressed now that her duel avatar had been imprisoned. He'd felt like she wasn't her usual self. When she'd come out to meet him, her eyes had been red, and she'd teared up just a little when he told her the reason for his sudden visit. She'd gotten back to normal while they sat across from each other eating, so he'd forgotten and accidentally brought up a direct duel. But even if it were possible system-wise, it was obvious that Kuroyukihime would not be in the mood for a duel at the moment.

"Um. I-I'm sorry. I just..." Haruyuki dropped his head and moved to shove the XSB cable back into his pocket.

But a pale hand stretched out to grab it.

"All right. I'll accept that challenge."

"Huh?" When he lifted his head, he found Kuroyukihime's gentle—and slightly mischievous—smile as she sat on the other side of the table. He stared into her dark eyes and tried to see if she was forcing herself to act okay, but his limit for meeting her gaze was three seconds. He dropped his head once again.

He thought he should perhaps apologize and take back his request for a duel, but Kuroyukihime's hand stayed firmly where it was on the table.

Who's cheering up whom here? Haruyuki wondered as he plugged one end of the cable into his own Neurolinker and offered the plug at the opposite end to his host.

When she connected it to her Neurolinker, as black as a grand piano, a wired-connection warning popped up and then disappeared. Colors were automatically corrected in his field of view, so that only his connection partner appeared before his eyes.

“When we do this, I remember that day,” she murmured in neurospeak that echoed in his mind.

Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down. *“Yes. It hasn’t even been a year since then but it already feels like ancient history.”*

“That day” was, of course, October 24 of last year, the day Haruyuki became a Burst Linker. He’d gone to the lounge in the school cafeteria at the invitation of the black spangle butterfly who’d appeared in the squash game of the Umesato Junior High local net. He had very nearly fainted under the pressure of the collective gazes of all the other students there as he direct-linked with Kuroyukihime. And then she gave him the executable file marked, “BB2039.exe.”

He didn’t know why it had a filename extension used in an old computer OS or the reason why it worked on a Neurolinker. He simply tapped the icon as if in a trance, his field of view was enveloped in red flames, and then Haruyuki became a Burst Linker.

“For those of us who accelerate, a year is a long time. But, yes, right. When October twenty-fourth comes again this year, how about we celebrate Silver Crow’s first birthday? I’ll even make—No, never mind.” Kuroyukihime cleared her throat for real, and straightened up in her seat. *“Well then, who should challenge whom?”*

“Oh! O-of course, allow me to challenge you!” Haruyuki declared, then took a deep breath before he called in a hushed hiss, “Burst Link!”

The arena for their first direct duel in some time was a Sacred Ground stage; floating octahedral crystals were spread out across the field. Haruyuki came down to stand on the roof of a ten-story building and narrowed his eye lenses beneath his mirrored mask to scan his surroundings.

The sunlight falling through the gaps in the thick clouds made the crystals shine all the colors of the rainbow, and the sight was definitely one of the most beautiful to be found among the many varied duel stages. But the shape of the regular octahedrons now inevitably brought to mind Black Vise's Incarnate technique, Octahedral Isolation. Kuroyukihime and the other kings were imprisoned by his higher-level technique, Icosahedral Insulation, but that fact didn't do much to lift Haruyuki's spirits. Hoping that the sight of these crystals didn't depress his Legion Master wherever she had appeared in the field, he once again checked the terrain around him.

Suginami was divided up into Area No. 1 on the north side of the Chuo Line train tracks, Area No. 2 east of the Kanpachi main road on the southeast side, and Area No. 3 on the southwest side. Kuroyukihime's house was located in Area No. 3, along with Umesato Junior High. Unlike with a normal duel, however, players in a direct duel started at random positions within the stage. The wide road immediately to his south was likely Oume Highway and the Chuo Line overpass bridge was to his north, so his current location appeared to be the Suginami Ward office. Since this was a wired duel, there was no Gallery.

Built in the 1990s, the ward office was wider than it was tall, but since there were few tall buildings in this part of Suginami, he had a pretty decent view of the area. If Kuroyukihime were moving along Oume Highway, he'd definitely be able to spot her, but the guide cursor displayed in his view pointed due south toward a row of buildings transformed into temples from a foreign country, so he couldn't yet pick out the figure of the Black King.

As the challenger, he decided he should close the distance himself

rather than wait on the roof for her to approach him. Haruyuki spread the silver wings on his back and jumped off the ten-story ward office without the slightest hesitation. His special-attack gauge was empty, so he couldn't actually fly, but when he descended to the road in a gliding spiral, he landed with almost no sound.

The guide cursor still pointed south. A group of buildings/temples stood on the south side of Oume Highway, which ran east to west, and while Kuroyukihime's duel avatar might have been slender, there was no way she could slip through the gaps between the structures. If she was going to come at him, she would have to take a detour around to the intersection to the east or the west, but if she did that, the cursor would follow her movement.

He took a deep breath before chanting a quiet voice command. "Equip Lucid Blade."

A white light gathered on his left hip and materialized into a slender longsword. He touched the hilt to make sure it had fully materialized.

When he thought about it, this was the first time he was dueling Kuroyukihime using this Enhanced Armament that was his level-six bonus. Just as her nickname World End would have it, the Black King's avatar specialized in cutting power with the swords of her four limbs. Given this, it was fair to say that her swordsmanship was of the highest level in the Accelerated World. It was probably slightly suicidal to challenge such an opponent with a sword, but nevertheless, Haruyuki wanted to fight with this new partner he had sought out and selected.

Of course, he had no expectation of victory. The optimal outcome for him was for Kuroyukihime to stand tall and win this battle with her head held high so that she could eat the last sandwich.

Still—or maybe precisely because of that—he wanted to go up against her with everything he had. He wanted to give her his full power in recognition of how graciously she had accepted his not-entirely-thought-out duel request.

The guide cursor didn't so much as twitch, but he could see Black Lotus's special-attack gauge charging rapidly in the top right of his field of view. That meant she'd begun destroying the stage's crystals.

Undaunted, Haruyuki also approached an octahedral rainbow crystal floating on the road and pulverized it with a right mid-kick. The amount of charge he received for his efforts was unsatisfying compared with the Unlimited Neutral Field, but at least here the sound of destruction wouldn't attract Enemies. After the fifth crystal fell, his special-attack gauge was full.

"All right," he murmured.

He was about to deploy the wings on his back to fly to her when a

flash of light cut across the front wall of a five-story building on the south side of the road. Part of the wall fell away to reveal a hole in the shape of an inverted triangle, and a sharp silhouette charged fiercely out of it. The sword of her right hand caught the light and glimmered as she swung it down so fast, he could hardly see it.

Kuroyukihime destroyed a building.

She's so fast. I can't dodge.

Thoughts flickering through his mind at top speed, Haruyuki reflexively drew Lucid Blade with his right hand.

Black Lotus's swords were fused to her arms, but the reach of her slashing attack was greater than he'd imagined. It was already too late for him to dodge to either side or the rear. But there was also no way he could defend against this blow with his arms. Kuroyukihime's ability Terminate Sword would easily slice through Silver Crow's metal armor.

He could have turned things around using the Incarnate System, but just because he'd been fighting with Incarnate full throttle lately, and just because the right to eat the sandwich—no, the right to have *her* eat the sandwich—was on the line, didn't mean he could go around breaking the Legion rule of only using Incarnate when attacked with it first.

Thus, Haruyuki chose to defend with his sword, although it wasn't like he had absolute faith in this option, either. Up to this point in time, the only things that had been able to cross swords with the limbs of the Black King and come out mostly unscathed had been legendary Enhanced Armaments, such as the demon sword Star Caster that the Armor of Catastrophe Chrome Disaster had been equipped with, and the Green King's unbreakable great shield, the Strife, one of the Seven Arcs. Silver Crow's Lucid Blade didn't even begin to compare to the power of those weapons, especially given that Silver Crow was not a sword user by nature and the blade itself had only come into his possession as a level-six bonus.

Regardless, Haruyuki caught Kuroyukihime's slashing attack from above with his beloved sword as soon as he had drawn it from its scabbard.

Skreeeeek!

The obsidian blade stopped millimeters from his silver mask.

He'd defended—well, not quite. At the intersection of their swords, her blade was digging into his, albeit only slightly. If it came down to a contest of power, there was a strong possibility that he would be sliced in half together with his weapon.

"Nngh!" Grunting sharply, Haruyuki sank down as he turned his wrist. Kuroyukihime's sword slid along the ridges of Lucid Blade, sending sparks scattering. Now the blade closed in on his right

shoulder, and he drew it in until the very last possible second before he rolled it along and then pushed it back with not force but timing—the Way of the Flexible—using a sword.



The axis of Black Lotus's body wobbled the tiniest bit, and not letting this momentary opening slip by, Haruyuki used his wings for a full-powered dash backward. Sparks flew as sword separated from sword. He only managed to catch his breath once he'd put more than three meters between them.

Kuroyukihime recovered her balance right away, but she didn't immediately come in for a counterattack. The bluish-purple eye lenses beneath her semi-mirrored goggles blinked, and he heard her calm voice.

"Is that your new Enhanced Armament? Fairly decent sword you've got there."

"I—I guess so." He turned his eyes to the blade for just an instant and discovered that five millimeters were indeed missing from it. *Sorry for putting you in this situation*, he thought to it.

"Choosing this sword was a bit of a selfish impulse," he said out loud. "To follow through on what I've been doing since level one, I should have taken the flight enhancement just like I have so far. And if I wanted to expand the range of my fighting techniques, it would have been better to pick an offensive or defensive special attack. Silver Crow's a fighting-type duel avatar originally, so who knew what kind of compatibility he'd have with a sword? Plus, it's not like I'm good with a sword or anything."

"Hmm." She cocked her head to one side. "So then why did you act on this selfish impulse?"

"Um." As always, he was not great at explaining what he was thinking or feeling, but unlike his flesh-and-blood self, his duel avatar's speech organs had never betrayed the orders of his brain. In an unconscious gesture, he put a hand to his chest and continued.

"So far, I've enhanced my avatar in ways that would make my dream of flying even faster a reality. But then I started wondering if that was enough... Like, Shinomiya has purification, which she uses to help people, and Master Fuko's Wind Veil and Akira's Maelstrom are techniques that allow them to protect their comrades. Even you, Kuroyukihime! You look like you're specialized in attacking, but you use your Overdrive's Mode Green when you're on the defensive in a group battle. So I wanted to be able to do more for my comrades when we're fighting together. That was basically my thinking. I figured I could fight opponents immune to striking attacks if I learned to use a sword."

"My Mode Green was originally a technique for a fight of one against many, though," Kuroyukihime noted with a wry smile. "However, I do believe what you just said is the polar opposite of a 'selfish impulse.'"

“Oh, but I’m not done yet.” Shrinking into himself somewhat, Haruyuki picked up where he left off.

“I wasn’t lying when I said this sort of stuff was in my head when I chose the sword as my bonus. Not exactly. But later, while I was practicing with it and learning how to fight with it in a real battle, I realized that maybe I had another reason... Um. Taku and I made a promise. We said we would fight again for real when we both reached level seven.”

“Oh-ho.”

Haruyuki had the bad habit of suddenly going on a tangent in conversation, but Kuroyukihime simply nodded, without a hint of confusion.

“I see. You’ve both reached the step before level seven—before you become high rankers. As your parent, I couldn’t be more delighted. But what does the sword have to do with your promise to Takumu?”

“Well,” he said, “I think... I want to fight Taku with a sword. And I think I picked Lucid Blade because of that. And I guess I feel like that’s a pretty—no, a *very* selfish motive.”

Haruyuki had expected that upon hearing this confession, Kuroyukihime would laugh or get mad. But she did neither; her black crystal avatar merely nodded slowly.

“Mmm. I see. But Cyan Pile’s Enhanced Armament is not a sword. It’s a Pile Driver, correct? If the rules for your fight allow the use of Incarnate, then he could indeed use his Cyan Blade, but your sword would be no match for that weapon. Not until you develop an Incarnate technique to enhance your own weapon.”

“Hmm. I don’t want us to use Incarnate in our fight, so he’d have to get a sword, too, right?” Haruyuki paused. “It’d be great if he could get one as his level-seven bonus, but if not, we could try for a drop from a high-level Enemy or finally go to the shop.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Huh?” He frowned. “What do you mean ‘why’?”

“Why would you go to such lengths simply to fight Takumu with a sword?”

Haruyuki knew it was a reasonable question, but he realized he didn’t really have an answer. He looked from the Lucid Blade in his right hand to the face mask of the Black King and back again, seeking the reason inside himself. But he couldn’t find it, so he offered up a theory instead.

“Because Taku’s best weapon is a sword. He’s out there at kendo practice every day, and his Incarnate technique is also a sword. So if I’m going to fight him at full power, I think we should both fight with swords.”

“Mmm. I see.” Although she made noises of agreement, she didn’t look like she fully accepted this line of thinking.

Haruyuki stood rooted to the spot, waiting for her to continue, and Kuroyukihime cleared her throat as if pushing away some kind of hesitation before gliding over to him.

In a duel with anyone other than a Legion member, he would have been on guard against a surprise attack here in the guise of continuing the conversation, but the thought never even crossed his mind as he lowered the sword in his hand.

A mere fifty centimeters away from him, Kuroyukihime stared hard at Haruyuki with her sharp eye lenses.

“That’s not the full truth that lies in your heart,” she murmured finally. “Perhaps... you know it in the furthest recesses of your mind? Whether Incarnate is allowed or not, if you both put everything you have into the fight, every last drop of your strength”—she paused for a moment, and her voice grew even quieter as she continued—“you will most likely emerge victorious.”

“Huh?!” He jerked his head back in surprise and then shook it earnestly. “No way... There’s no way! I mean, I did win our very first duel. But he’s worked superhard since then and gotten really strong. I have no idea which one of us would win. I really don’t!”

“I wouldn’t think to refute that. Nor Takumu’s hard work,” she agreed. “But half of his self is in the real world—in his activities on the kendo team. In contrast—well, I wouldn’t say all of you, but some seventy percent of your heart is inclined toward the Accelerated World.”

“Um. Well, that might be true...”

“When it comes down to it,” she continued, “strength for a Burst Linker is the duel avatar’s performance together with the player’s abilities, knowledge, and experience. As of late, you’ve fought a succession of powerful warriors. The ones I know of include the Green Legion’s Iron Pound, the Blue Legion’s Coba-Manga sisters, the White Legion’s Glacier Behemoth and Rose Milady, the Society’s Shadow Cloaker and Argon Array... You’ve even exchanged blows with the Green King himself, if only briefly.”

Hearing the names she listed, Haruyuki shivered belatedly. He had indeed fought them all, but he couldn’t say he’d beaten even a single one of them under his own power. And he couldn’t really imagine going up against any of them ever again. That was how painful and difficult those fights had been. The experience had strengthened him and taught him a great deal—this was an unassailable fact. However.

“But Taku’s had his feet to the fire too many times to count! When the Society abducted Niko, he smashed Black Vise’s Octahedral

Isolation, and in the Territories the other day, he was instrumental in protecting everyone from the Devil-class Enemies—”

“That’s it right there,” she interrupted.

“What?” he responded, baffled.

Kuroyukihime took her eyes from his face and glanced upward, probably to check how much time they had left. Following her lead, Haruyuki looked up himself and saw there were still 1,300 seconds—about twenty-one minutes remaining.

“Let’s sit for a moment,” she said, and then she proceeded to cross Oume Highway, heading toward the Suginami Ward office building Haruyuki had leapt down from. With the sword of her right hand, she sliced through two of the thick pillars in the garden in front of the building like they were made of butter. Once the tops fell backward, smashed to pieces, and disappeared, she fashioned two impromptu seats.

Kuroyukihime sat gracefully while Haruyuki plopped himself down across from her. He returned the Lucid Blade to its sheath and sighed.

“It’s so quiet,” she murmured, and she turned her goggles upward once more. She wasn’t looking at how long they had left now, but rather at the sky above them. The Sacred Ground stage was overcast as a general rule, but rather than sticky rain clouds hanging inert in the sky, belts of stratocumulus clouds drifted along at a fairly good clip, allowing them glimpses of a faintly golden sky in the gaps between.

As he stared absently at the flow above them, he heard her voice once more.

“A wired duel is nice sometimes.” She smiled. “No Gallery, no Enemies, only the two duelers alone in the world.”

“You can only do this if you’re together, huh,” Haruyuki responded casually, still looking up at the sky, and a giggle came back to him.

“Well of course, that’s what a wired duel *is*.”

“I—I guess so.” He looked back down and shrank into himself.

“But it is true.” Kuroyukihime nodded firmly. “There likely aren’t too many Burst Linkers who can duel directly on an everyday basis like you and I can. Normally, the only ones known to each other in the real are parent and child, and more than a few Burst Linkers have been parted from either parent or child due to total point loss or else forced into hostilities for some other reason.”

She herself was in definitive opposition to her own parent, the White King, White Cosmos. Takumu’s parent, a member of the Leonids, had been censured for their use and dissemination of a backdoor program as judged by the Blue King. The number of his

friends who had lost their parents—Niko, Utai, Rui/Magenta, Satomi/Mint—was certainly not small.

“I... guess so.” His voice was barely audible.

Total point loss = Forced uninstall. This was the fundamental rule of Brain Burst. Because of this constraint, duels were serious contests, and the Accelerated World was no mere game world. But when he thought about it again now, he couldn’t help but shudder in fear at the ruthlessness—the *cruelty*—of this rule.

Burst Linkers who lost all their points also lost all memories pertaining to Brain Burst. While this was the mechanism that allowed the Accelerated World to remain hidden, it was also thought to be a measure of salvation for those who had lost all their points. But simply imagining the inexplicable emptiness that would wash over you after you lost everything made his limbs grow cold with terror.

That said, he didn’t think it was right for a Burst Linker who had lost all their points to be pulled back into the Accelerated World through some underhanded means and made to fight once more. Revived as a duplicate personality, Dusk Taker Seiji Nomi was impelled by a hatred even greater than the emotion he’d shown before his total point loss and so he’d run wild, out of control, until he was finally consumed by the Incarnate energy emitted from the ISS kit main body and vanished in a veil of haunting screams. Haruyuki assumed that the one who’d brought Nomi back to “life” had been the White King, also known by the nicknames Transient Eternity and Necromancer, and regardless of her reasons, he felt that her way of doing things was wrong. Very wrong.

“I never even considered it,” Kuroyukihime said abruptly, and Haruyuki lifted his face with a gasp.

“Considered what?” he asked.

“Ever having real-life interactions with so many Burst Linkers,” she told him. “In the first Nega Nebulus, the only ones I met in the real were Fuko and Utai. But now, I don’t know... The number of people I see on a daily basis easily exceeds ten. Let’s see...”

“Master Fuko, Shinomiya, Akira, Chiyu, Taku, me,” Haruyuki counted them off on his fingers. “Choco and Yume and Satomi. Kusakabe Rin, Niko, Pard. That’s twelve. A-and...” After a moment’s hesitation, he steeled himself and added, “If you count Wakamiya, there’s thirteen of us.”

“... Aah, yes. Thirteen.” Her voice was calm, but she crossed her sword-hands in what was likely an unconscious movement, wrapping them around her body.

He wavered again and then asked, “You still haven’t heard from Wakamiya?”

The black crystal avatar wordlessly shook her head.

Umesato Junior High student council secretary and Kuroyukihime's best friend, Megumi Wakamiya—Orchid Oracle—had abruptly appeared in the Territories against the White Legion the day before and transformed the stage into the Unlimited Neutral Field with her astounding Incarnate technique Paradigm Breakdown. The battle ended with the new Nega Nebulus just barely snatching the victory, but when Megumi stayed back on the main battlefield alone with Black Lotus, she had simply said she was sorry and then pierced her own heart with Black Lotus's sword to vanish from the stage.

After that, none of them had been able to get in touch with Megumi, and then she had appeared before Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki in an unexpected form—though he didn't even know if that had actually been Wakamiya.

When Wolfram Cerberus charged into the meeting of the Seven Kings, his right shoulder—formerly home to the personality copy of Dusk Taker—spoke in Megumi's somehow ephemeral voice, which was followed by a pale-peach overlay, and the stage was transformed into the Unlimited Neutral Field again.

Thinking about it, it seemed like they should assume the Megumi that had appeared there was a duplicate presence like Taker. But unlike Nomi, Wakamiya hadn't lost her memories of being a Burst Linker. More precisely, although she'd previously lost all her points and had Brain Burst forcibly uninstalled, she'd regained her memories immediately before the Territories on Saturday.

Atop a small tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field, Megumi Wakamiya had told Haruyuki that the White King had set out a lone proposition after she restored Megumi's memories and the BB program: If Megumi joined the Territories and used Paradigm Breakdown there, the White King would bring someone beloved to Megumi back to life. There was no way she could have refused—the "beloved someone" was a tragic Originator, Saffron Blossom, parent to Megumi and Rose Milady. Long, long ago, the White King herself had driven her to total point loss.

When Haruyuki revealed this truth to Megumi, she realized that the White King had been manipulating her, and she restored the Unlimited Neutral Field to the Territories stage. If she hadn't, Haruyuki and his comrades would have been swallowed up by the herd of Devil-class Enemies that attacked them and very likely been annihilated.

In other words, by the end of the Territories, Megumi knew what the Acceleration Research Society was up to, and she had broken free of the emotional control of the White King. And yet not only had she not contacted Kuroyukihime, but she had been "equipped" in Wolfram Cerberus and had used her Incarnate technique again. What on Earth

had happened...?

"If only it wasn't summer break," Kuroyukihime said lifelessly, her arms dropping limply to her sides. "If I could see Megumi at school tomorrow—well, even supposing she were absent, that would also tell me something. But in this situation, all I can do is keep sending messages and calling her."

"Is that *really* all you can do, though?" Haruyuki asked timidly.

Kuroyukihime narrowed her eye lenses behind her goggles. "Are you saying there's another way to contact her?"

"Um. What about going directly to Wakamiya's house?"

He didn't think he was suggesting anything even remotely outlandish, but Kuroyukihime didn't react at all for some time.

Eventually, she blinked and said with a sigh, "Of all the things, how could I—no, of course I wouldn't think of it. The idea never even occurred to me."

"Um, have you ever... been to Wakamiya's house?" he asked.

"Not once. And she's never come to mine, either." She shook her head. "We've gone shopping together or had tea after school any number of times, but... It seems that Megumi's home situation is just as complex as my own. Then again, I would think few Burst Linkers could claim different."

Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down without a word. Put another way, the majority of Burst Linkers were able to clear the BB program installation requirement of being equipped with a Neurolinker since infancy precisely because there was something twisted or problematic in their home lives.

"So then," he started, "is going to Wakamiya's house out of the question?"

"No, that's not it. I am still the vice president of the student council," she noted. "I'm able to remotely access the students' personal information database."

But that's not because you're vice president. It's actually because you tweaked a bunch of stuff in the Umesato local net using that authority, isn't it? The thought was in his head, but he couldn't exactly say that, so he leaned forward and told her, "I-if you want to try going over there, I'll come with you!"

"Mmm." She nodded. "I'd appreciate that. But... time-wise, it would have to be tomorrow."

"I guess so."

It was about seven in the evening in the real world, and although it was still more or less light out at this time in July, it was a bit late for a junior high student to be out alone.

Through this chain of thought, Haruyuki remembered that he still hadn't sent his mother a message, but he could think about that once

the duel was over. Right now, there was something more important at hand.

“Um. If you’re going to go to Wakamiya’s house, then I think there’s someone you should talk to before you do. Or actually, someone you should hear out.”

“Oh?” Kuroyukihime cocked her head to one side. “And who would that be?”

“Um...” He paused. “The White Legion’s Rose Milady.”

“Wha...?” She was speechless before letting out a sigh. “Oh, I see. You spoke to Grumpy in the Territories yesterday. Megumi—Oracle—and Rose are Saffron Blossom’s children and they both want Saffron resurrected. In which case, I guess it’s true I should discuss the situation with Rose, as well.”

Here, she cut herself off and then turned a somehow complicated gaze on Haruyuki.

“But are you saying then that you have some means of communicating with her? Did you go so far as to trade addresses in the middle of the Territories?”

“N-n-n-n-n-no!” Haruyuki flapped his hands frantically in front of his face before trying desperately to explain. “I *do* know a way of contacting her if that’s what we’re talking about, but it’s not like I asked for her address or anything. We could go through the Highest Level...”

“Was that it?” Kuroyukihime laughed cheerfully, and he finally realized she had been teasing him.

Now that he thought about it, she did know that he’d been summoned by the Archangel Metatron and come face-to-face with Rose Milady on the Highest Level right before the meeting of the Seven Kings that day. Although the one who’d actually explained all this to her had been Fuko, his companion there.

As he was feeling sorry for himself underneath his mask, Kuroyukihime held up a hand.

“Ah, sorry. It just came out when I thought about you making friends with yet another F-type.”

“Frie—No, no, no, we’re not friends or anything at all, no,” he protested. “I mean, she probably thinks I’m just some small fry from an enemy Legion.”

“You never know.” He could practically hear her arched eyebrow. “After all, you said Leo’s Dualis were quite rude to you at first, but now...”

“I-it’s not anything ‘now’!” Haruyuki pushed back hard against the implications, and was about to get the conversation back on track, when he had a sudden realization: They had supposedly sat down here to talk about Takumu, and before that, they had started this wired

duel to determine which of them would eat the sandwich.

He once again checked the time remaining and saw they were down to fifteen minutes. The issue with Megumi was important, true, but he was also curious about what Kuroyukihime had started to say before they sat down.

“Um, Kuroyukihime?” he started. “Before we talk about Rose, can I ask you about Taku? You mentioned something about how the issue was all the tough battles Taku’s been through.”

“Oh, we were in the middle of talking about him, yes.” Straightening up on top of her pillar seat, Kuroyukihime shook her head slightly. “Naturally, there’s no issue with the fact that Takumu’s come through these battles himself. I also recognize that he’s steadily grown stronger in every respect. But don’t you sense it as his friend? That Takumu takes too many intropunitive actions?”

“Intropunitive?” Haruyuki frowned. “You mean he blames himself? Like, he punishes himself?”

“Exactly.” She nodded sharply.

His avatar’s mouth straightened into a line, and Haruyuki stared at the white-tiled ground. Unfortunately, he couldn’t refute Kuroyukihime’s observation.

It was true that Takumu had spoken of his own crimes any number of times and also tried to sacrifice himself to protect his comrades just as often. Haruyuki had told him over and over that it wasn’t his fault, but Takumu almost certainly still hadn’t forgiven himself for setting up the backdoor program in Chiyuri’s Neurolinker or for hunting the Black King. He’d also turned to the ISS kit out of his own self-hatred and despair.

From Haruyuki’s perspective, Takumu had seemed to have it all, but now he saw that they were fundamentally very similar. Ever since they were little, Haruyuki had gradually grown increasingly envious of tall, cool Takumu, who was good at academics *and* sports, until finally he pulled away from him and Chiyuri. But Takumu had also succumbed to the temptation of the backdoor program in his desire for whatever it was that Haruyuki had that he didn’t—although Haruyuki still didn’t really know what that was.

In their big battle at the hospital where Kuroyukihime had lain unconscious, and again when they fought at the time of the ISS kit crisis, Haruyuki and Takumu had revealed to each other what was deep in their souls and clashed with all their might. But there was a hint of lingering unpleasantness. And to eliminate this, they’d promised to duel at level seven. If Haruyuki held back in any way, Takumu would never forgive him, and of course, the opposite held true, as well. But Kuroyukihime was saying that the way the two friends were now, Haruyuki would win.

“I feel like Taku blaming himself... and his strength...are two different things, though,” Haruyuki asserted, lifting his head.

“It would be in a normal, everyday duel,” Kuroyukihime agreed. “Takumu’s calm nature, his powers of observation, his analytical skills, and the excellent strategies these lead him to are already in the domain of a high ranker. However—and I said this earlier as well—one-third of a Burst Linker’s strength is refined through experience. You’re not wrong that Takumu has also faced too many fierce battles to count, but in a live-or-die situation, he would sacrifice himself and save his comrades.”

Kuroyukihime paused here, and her eye lenses shone crystal clear beneath her goggles.

“But Haruyuki, you’re a bit different. No matter what happens, you don’t give up. You always do whatever it takes to make sure both you *and* your comrades survive. Or perhaps that’s just how it turns out... In those extreme situations, you don’t only think about how to defeat the enemy before you. I shivered when Fuko told me you defeated *the* Argon Array in an Incarnate fight.”

“N-no, that totally wasn’t me alone,” he protested. “If Master hadn’t pulled me back, I would have gotten my head blown off and died before I could mount an attack.”

“As careless as ever, I see.” She giggled. “But after that, you smashed Argon’s Infinite Array dead on, didn’t you? To a veteran of her class, the speed of her Incarnate technique activation would be basically the same as that of a normal special attack. And yet you were faster than that. So have a little more faith in yourself.”

At this rare unreserved compliment, Haruyuki squirmed and shook his head quickly. “Th-that was thanks to the wings Metatron lent me. You mentioned all these powerful people I fought aside from Argon, but I didn’t beat a single one of them by myself.”

“All of those fights inspired significant growth within you, however,” Kuroyukihime noted. “This strength of yours, to challenge powerful fighters without shrinking back, to try and win come hell or high water... Unfortunately, that’s something Takumu currently lacks. I’ll say it again. The reason that you are *limiting* your fight with him to sword against sword is because somewhere deep in your heart, you feel you would win if it was a no-holds-barred contest, isn’t it?”

“N-no!” Haruyuki earnestly denied this once more. “It’s not limiting or anything. I just want to duel Takumu with our swords...”

“Then I’ll ask you.” Her voice was gentle, but he also felt the steel at its center. “If you were to fight Takumu with that sword, would you seal away your flight ability? Those wings on your back; the very reason for your existence? Do you think Takumu would agree to a contest like that?”

“.....!”

Haruyuki inhaled sharply, but the air in his virtual lungs showed no signs of returning as words. Holding his breath, he reflected on the girl's question.

The truth was, he had realized it a little. That at the moment, his flight ability and Lucid Blade were not exactly compatible.

He could adapt his Aerial Combo, which combined striking techniques with propulsion from his wings, to attack with a sword. But the true pinnacle of his flight ability was indeed the speed and ability to maneuver freely in the sky of the stage, and the power of a plummeting attack was much greater with a dive kick than a slashing offensive. The truth was, when Haruyuki crushed Argon Array, he had chosen not his sword, but his own right leg. In fact, he hadn't even considered using Lucid Blade.

He slowly exhaled and half muttered, “It's true. I might have to seal away my wings if we fight with blades. But if Takumu's using a sword, too, then he'll end up sealing away the Pile Driver of his right arm. So then the conditions will be... equal... won't they?”

“I'm sorry, but Takumu won't think so.” Shaking her head, Kuroyukihime raised the sword of her right hand and pointed it at a slender ray of golden light shining through a break in the clouds. “For Takumu, the sword is a familiar weapon. Possibly more so than his Pile Driver... But that's not the case for you. The way you caught my blow earlier with the Way of the Flexible was magnificent, but you could've handled it more smoothly with your bare hands. This sword is still a tool to extend your reach. It hasn't even reached the most basic of levels for a sword-bearing avatar—you're still not one with the sword.”

“One... with the sword?” he parroted back.

“Mmm.” She nodded. “It might be just the tiniest amount, but you were putting extra power into it back there. The reason your blade was nicked is because you were trying to push back my slicing attack with force.” Her words made all the sense of a riddle, but her last comment at least caused something to fall into place for him.

Deep in his ears, he felt like he heard the echo of a voice.

You mustn't try to push back power with power.

There's no need for power in sword techniques in the Accelerated World.

He'd heard this voice while fighting the seventh Dwarf of the White Legion, Glacier Behemoth. But he still had no idea who exactly it belonged to. The manner of speaking was similar to that of Amaterasu, one of the Four Saints, whom he'd encountered on the Highest Level, but the tone was totally different.

“What’s the matter, Haruyuki?” Kuroyukihime asked, and he hurriedly lifted the face he’d lowered at some point and bobbed his head up and down.

“Oh! I-I’m sorry. Um. I get a tiny bit of what you’re trying to say. Strikes...” He paused. “The force of punches is determined by speed and power, but it’s a little different for swords, right? This isn’t the real world, after all. It’s the Accelerated World, so a sword is like, um, a blade—no, well, that’s obvious, huh? Ummmmmm, if you really dig deep, it’s not even a blade, though. It’s like the cutting power is a concept, or...” Haruyuki earnestly worked to give voice to his thoughts even as he started to lose the thread of them himself a little.

Kuroyukihime blinked once before saying, “Oh-ho. So you *do* understand, don’t you? Surprisingly. Of course, it’s not like this for all swords. Some are used to beat opponents back with their sheer weight like a blunt weapon, but mine and that Lucid Blade of yours are specialized in cutting power. If you can master the use of such a sword, you will even be able to cut through steel. But the road to that point is endlessly long. The fact that you would think you could have an equal contest using swords against Takumu, who has been studying kendo since he was very young, is a little optimistic, I have to say.”

“... Right...” He hung his head in dejection before turning to the swordmaster as if seeking a rock to cling to. “But in that case, what should I do? If the fight is ‘anything goes,’ then you think I have the advantage, right? I really believe that when it comes to raw ability, we’re totally on the same level. Or actually, Taku might even be stronger than me. But the Metatron Wings... I borrowed this power from Metatron, so it’s outside the framework of the basic principle of same level, same potential. Still, it’s not like we can prohibit Enhanced Armament, and I know Taku would never agree to a rule prohibiting just my Metatron Wings.”

“Hmm.” She pondered the question for a brief moment. “I don’t think the Metatron Wings are the essential issue here, but well, it is true that Takumu would want you to use all of your strength. Ultimately, you have two choices.”

“Two?”

“First, you use your Incarnate techniques, the Metatron Wings, everything, and fight Takumu with your full power, no holds barred. It’s just as you said—I do think you would win given the difference in your experience fighting powerful warriors and your willpower to push through to victory, but it’s not as though that’s a foregone conclusion.”

“A-and the other choice?” he asked.

“Just as you wish, you seal away your flight ability and your Metatron Wings and the Pile Driver, and fight sword against sword,”

she told him. “But before you can do that, you have to become capable enough with the sword for Takumu to accept these conditions. Up into the territory of a true master... In that event, you *might* be able to have the serious contest you and Takumu desire, one that burns up everything inside you.”

“T-true master,” Haruyuki muttered, stunned, and touched the sheath of the Lucid Blade unconsciously. “But I only just got this as a bonus for level six. How many days—no, weeks—would I have to train if I wanted to become a master?”

“You’re too optimistic!” Kuroyukihime smiled indulgently. “This is on the order of a few months at the very least—years, depending on how things go. Takumu has been practicing kendo since grade three—so, five, six years, yes? If you’re going to try and catch up with him, halfhearted efforts won’t be enough.”

“... I... guess not. Totally,” Haruyuki replied, picturing Takumu in the kendo dojo swinging his bamboo sword, together with Cyan Pile readying his Incarnate sword Cyan Blade.

Training for years—it wasn’t impossible in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where more than four hundred days would pass in about ten hours in the real world. But Haruyuki had never once tackled the challenge of such a long-term continuous dive because of the warning Kuroyukihime had given him back when he’d first learned of the existence of this virtual space. If you dive for too long, reality slips away. Even memories of the real world become hazy if a player is away long enough.

Once the Territories from the previous day ended and Haruyuki returned to his home, he’d once again visited the Unlimited Neutral Field under the orders of the Archangel Metatron and trained for two months to strengthen their link. At present, that was the longest dive he had ever done. But now Kuroyukihime herself was proposing he train for several years. Otherwise, he’d never master fighting with a sword—and he’d never get his fair fight with Takumu.

“That’s... just what I want,” Haruyuki said, firming up his resolve as he gripped the sheath of Lucid Blade. “If it means I can fight Taku with a sword, then I’ll train however many years it takes. And it’s not because I’d win with no rules or anything like that... I simply want to face Taku this way. And when I do, Taku and I will both be able to move forward. I firmly believe this.”

“I see. Understood.” Kuroyukihime looked at Haruyuki with her bluish-purple eye lenses. “Apologies for the nitpicking, Haruyuki. If that’s the case, then I won’t begrudge you my assistance. I do happen to have a passing knowledge of sword techniques. I’ll be there until you reach the master level and—” Abruptly, the flow of encouraging words stopped, and Haruyuki blinked rapidly in surprise.

And then he finally realized that Kuroyukihime *couldn't* join him to train with the sword in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Because the instant they dived, Black Lotus would be burned to death in the intense flames of Inti. Or rather, she would have to wait an hour or so to be regenerated first, but the end result was the same. Until they found a way for her to escape from the Unlimited EK trap set by Black Vise, Kuroyukihime could not visit the Unlimited Neutral Field.

"Kuroyukihime." Leaning forward, Haruyuki argued vehemently, like a man possessed, "I am totally, *totally* going to help you out of Inti's flames. At the Legion meeting tonight, we'll all talk and find a way for you to escape. I promise... I promise."

"Ohh, I know." Her avatar relaxed, and she seemed to be smiling. "I believe in you—you and everyone in Nega Nebulus. We've finally made it to the point where we're exposing all of the White Legion's evil deeds. We can't allow ourselves to be stopped here. I have to get out of that ridiculous ball of flames immediately and declare war on Cosmos."

"Right!" Haruyuki agreed with all his heart, and as he yanked his head up, he caught sight of the timer in the upper part of his field of view. In the blink of an eye, they were down to only five minutes. "Oh! We're done already. Okay, I'll apply for a draw—"

"What half-baked nonsense is that?" Kuroyukihime said in exasperation, and stood up soundlessly from the severed pillar. "Five minutes is plenty. Let's finish this, Haruyuki."

"Unh?! O-okay," he squeaked as he got to his feet in a panic. After hurrying to draw Lucid Blade, he realized that there was one more thing he needed to do. "Oh! P-please wait a sec."

"What? Now you get scared?"

"N-no, that's not it," he protested. "Well, that's not *not* it, but please give me just a little time before we resume the duel."

"Mmm?" She cocked her head to one side. "I don't mind, but there's only four and a half—"

"It's okay. We'll be done in thirty seconds," he declared and extended his hands. "Kuroyukihime, please give me your hands."

"F-fine..." Looking confused, Kuroyukihime raised the swords of her hands and brought up a faint overlay in the tips. *Krrk!* The sword tips split and transformed into five surprisingly slender fingers.

Gently clasping the proffered hands, Haruyuki prayed, *Metatron, sorry to bug you when you're resting, but could you guide us to the Highest Level?*

He heard the reply right away, but it wasn't in the form of a voice, but rather a bell. Ringing repeatedly, the sound enveloped them and finally became a river of light tinged with a hazy heat, running through the circle created by their joined arms.

“Kuroyukihime, please feel the flow of the light.” He now sent his thoughts toward his duel partner, and heard a slightly perplexed voice in the back of his mind.

“Mmm... Like this?”

“Yes, that’s it. Concentrate... Here we go!”

He had no sooner announced this than he aligned his mind with the endlessly accelerating light. The sounds of the Sacred Ground stage receded, and the sights melted into a white light.

Skreeeeee!! By the time the sound of reacceleration rang out, both of their minds were already flying toward the space of the higher dimension.

“Are you sure it was a good idea to bring Lotus, servant?” These were the first words of the Archangel Metatron welcoming Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime to the Highest Level.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Haruyuki asked, wondering what exactly could be bad about that.

An air of exasperation drifted about the beautiful visage of the Archangel, her eyes still closed. “When you came with Raker, did she not say that Lotus would reach this place under her own power someday without asking for Raker’s help?”

“... Oh... R-right...”

“Well, that was impossible right from the outset, however. As I told you, since the beginnings of BB 2039, there has not been a single tiny warrior who reached the Highest Level without receiving the guidance of a Being,” she sniffed, while Haruyuki timidly checked on his guest.

Standing a little way off, the swordswoman had her back turned to them and was gazing at the infinite ocean of stars spreading out below them. Each and every one of those little lights was a social camera in the real world—what Metatron called a “node”—and these all came together to depict a detailed overview of the Tokyo terrain. Haruyuki and the other avatars were also represented by microscopic points of light, and since they had no physical bodies, attacks in this space had no meaning.

What was Kuroyukihime feeling? How did she feel about being shifted to this world without any explanation whatsoever? Haruyuki waited anxiously, and finally, he heard her quiet voice.

“I see. This is the Highest Level—the true form of the Accelerated World, hmm?” She sounded unexpectedly calm.

“Um, I-I’m sorry, Kuroyukihime,” he hurried to say. “I went and brought you here without telling you anything.”

“No need to apologize.” Kuroyukihime turned slowly and spread out her sword hands. “After hearing what you and Raker had to say about it, I wanted to visit this place someday. Although I didn’t anticipate that it would be today.”

“In that case, you should have asked my servant sooner then, shouldn’t you?” Metatron asked, baffled. “You’ve had several opportunities to do so.”

“Well, I suppose.” Kuroyukihime lowered her hands and shrugged. “Perhaps I was a little anxious about it. Reach level ten, obtain the final Arc sealed in the Castle, learn everything about this world... That’s all I’ve ever wanted in this life, but even I couldn’t imagine what it would look like to gaze out over the entirety of the Accelerated World.”

“S-so... how is it?” Haruyuki asked, voice hoarse.

The Black King replied with a single word. “Vast.”

“Huh? I-is that all?”

“What? That’s not enough for you?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just...” He trailed off, failing to find the right words.

“Well, I’m also a little surprised at my reaction,” she admitted. “I’d thought I would either be overwhelmed at the enormity of the Accelerated World... or conversely disappointed that that was all it was. But all I feel now is ‘vast.’ I wonder why.”

“That, Lotus,” Metatron said, “is because you have no interest in this world as a container.”

“Mmm.” Kuroyukihime thought for a second. “I don’t think that’s it.”

“I understand,” the Archangel continued. “Because I am the same way. This world is vast and deep. But in the end, it is a vessel, a miniature garden created by someone for some objective. As were we Beings. Which is exactly why I wish to know the reason this world exists. Why I exist.”

The Black King stared at her silently for a few seconds, and then moved her face mask up and down ever so slightly. “That is indeed true. I also wish to know the reason Brain Burst was created... The reason Burst Linkers fight... What lies at the heart of it all? I’ve always thought that there must be something more, something beyond this. Something outside of this duel avatar—no, outside of this shell called a human being that no one has ever seen before.”

She spoke half to herself, and Haruyuki’s eyes flew open. He was pretty sure he’d heard the same speech before. Over a wired connection at a table in the back of a Koenji café when Kuroyukihime had only just given him the BB program. She hadn’t changed. Although it had been nine months since then, and so many things had happened, although so many things had shifted, the desire locked away deep in her heart was the same as it always had been.

Back then, Haruyuki had answered her like this.

“In any game, some people want to forget about seeing the

ending, and they just roam around the map right before the end forever. They're obviously idiots. It's only natural to try for higher levels, if there are any. I mean, that's why Brain Burst exists, right?"

He placed his hand on his avatar's chest—although it lacked any physical manifestation at the moment—and declared to himself, *My feelings haven't changed, either. That desire to clear the game with Kuroyukihime, to see what's on the other side. That's why...*

"We'll get there, Kuroyukihime," Haruyuki said out loud, and then took a step forward, taking his hand from his chest and touching it to her shoulder. There was no sensation, but even so, he felt the faint heat in his fingertips. "From the ends of this world... to the center. You, me, Metatron, everyone in the Legion."

"... I suppose," Kuroyukihime replied, smiling—Haruyuki could only see Black Lotus's eye lenses in her goggles, but even so, he felt it—and as if switching mental gears, she said, somewhat more loudly, "And so, then. You didn't bring me here simply to show me the shape of the world, yes? What was your primary purpose?"

"Oh! R-right. Um." He took a step back and turned to the Archangel. "Metatron, how do you like Fufuan?" he asked as a bit of a preamble.

Although Metatron furrowed her slender eyebrows ever so slightly, she replied in her usual haughty tone, "It has its merits. Naturally, it doesn't *begin* to compare with my castle, but even such a cramped dwelling is pleasant when one is healing one's wounds. And no reckless little warriors may enter."

"R-right." He nodded. "How are your injuries? Have you recovered the power you used up in the fight with the White Legion?"

"You should have asked that question first, servant." Metatron reached out and flicked the forehead of Haruyuki's helmet lightly—for some reason, even in the Highest Level, he felt a mild shock from Metatron's attacks alone—and then continued in a clear voice. "When I fought with the Armor of Catastrophe Mark II, I lost all information other than my core... It is no mean feat to recover all of this, but thanks to Raker offering me the use of Fufuan, I was able to close off all of my senses other than the link with you and focus on my recovery. Currently, the rebuilding of my body is seventy-eight point three percent complete. If I continue to sleep like this for another ten years, I will fully recover my information."

"T-ten years?!" Haruyuki was stunned, and Metatron gave him her usual look of exasperation.

"That is a nap for me. And if converted to Lowest Level time, it is a mere three days and change, is it not?"

"W-well, that's true, but..." He nodded, but he didn't feel very optimistic. If they ended up having to fight a nonstandard entity like

the Mark II before her recovery was complete, Metatron would end up expending her very self once again.

Given that, he hesitated to discuss what they needed right now, but on the other hand, her pulling away from the world for the moment didn't change their own urgent situation. Steeling his resolve, he cut to the agenda at hand.

"Metatron, I called you because I want to talk to Amaterasu again. More precisely, I want to talk to her friend Rose Milady, but this is the only way I have of getting in touch with her, so..."

Metatron wasn't the only one who jumped in surprise the instant she heard Haruyuki's words. Kuroyukihime joined her.

"I see," the Archangel said finally. "Servant, is this request related to the abnormalities in the Mean Level?"

"A-abnormalities?" He raised an eyebrow under his mask.

"It is not large-scale as a phenomenon, but it has also never occurred before since the founding of the Accelerated World," she informed him crisply. "The Sun God Inti normally rolls freely in the Mean Level, but it is now stopped in the vicinity of Area Zero Zero—the Castle. I realized it immediately after you called me and I shifted to the Highest Level. This is the first time that butterball has ever stopped rolling or come so close to the Castle."

"B-butterball?" he echoed. "Do you not like Inti?"

"I neither like nor dislike that thing which does nothing but roll around, but it is an unpleasant presence." And yet Metatron sounded deeply annoyed. "Despite the fact that it is equipped with a priority that rivals that of us Saints and the Four Gods, it has never once responded to contact from us. You might say it is the most mysterious Being in the Accelerated World. About two thousand years ago, we finally reached the conclusion that even thinking about it was pointless, but up to that point, we had been forced to consider it in a number of ways. It was quite vexing."

Haruyuki unconsciously exchanged a look with Kuroyukihime before saying timidly, "Um. We know why Inti's stopped near the Castle."

"Oh?" Her usually lowered lids slid up the tiniest amount, and the Archangel looked at Haruyuki with divine golden eyes. "And that reason is?"

"Um." He hesitated. "This might bring up some unpleasant memories, but it's the same power that pulled your first form out of the Contrary Cathedral and moved you to Tokyo Midtown. Inti's bound right now by the Arc Luminary."

Instantly, a glacial air rose up around Metatron that would give Kuroyukihime's ultimate icy smile a run for its money.

"So you mean to say that this is once again the work of Oscillatory

Universe?" she said, her loathing apparent. "But why exactly? What can those creatures gain by fixing Inti to those coordinates?"

"That's..." Haruyuki was about to explain the events of the meeting of the Seven Kings and then paused.

Because Metatron had had all of her senses closed off since she moved to Fufuan, she didn't know that five of the kings, including Kuroyukihime, were trapped in a state of Unlimited EK inside Inti. Once she learned about this, she would probably—no, she would *definitely*—interrupt her rest and try to do something about the Sun God. He would be very glad for the help, and he did in fact believe that her cooperation would be essential in rescuing Kuroyukihime. But Haruyuki didn't want her going anywhere until she was completely recovered. In the Territories the previous day, she had launched Trisagion at full power while her wounds were not yet fully healed and used herself up tremendously once more.

"Speak, servant," the Archangel ordered in a firm voice, as if seeing the hesitation in Haruyuki's heart. And then she softened her tone slightly. "I, too, am a member of Nega Nebulus. And if you won't tell me, I shall simply have a look at your memories."

He couldn't refuse when she put it like that. He nodded, clenching hands made of faint light. "Okay. But I don't want you to go off and do anything on your own."

When he had explained what had happened at the meeting of the Seven Kings over the course of about five minutes of subjective time, Metatron simply nodded and turned her half-closed eyes downward. She stared at central Tokyo depicted in countless points of light and the Castle sitting darkly in its center before shifting her gaze to Kuroyukihime.

"Lotus, I regret to inform you that even moving Inti with my power is not possible, much less destroying it. It is a ball of blistering flame. Any physical attacks are incinerated before they can reach its core, and it absorbs heat energy attacks."

Metatron was normally the height of vainglory. Haruyuki was surprised by these unusually negative words toward her person, but Kuroyukihime simply assented passively.

"Mmm. I only ever saw it from far away, but apparently, a group of Burst Linkers tested all kinds of things long ago in an attempt to somehow defeat Inti. They all thought the only way would be to cool it with a large amount of water or ice, but strangely, it never appears when the Unlimited Neutral Field is an Ocean or a Storm."

"Inti most likely has a base like my own Contrary Cathedral or Amaterasu's Amano Iwato," Metatron said.

Haruyuki earnestly tried to imagine what sort of place a ball of

flames twenty meters across would make its base, but before he could give it any specific shape, Metatron spoke again.

"In which case, I suppose the only option here is to call Amaterasu."

"Huh? But I haven't told you why I want to talk to Rose yet," Haruyuki said.

"You'll simply tell Amaterasu the same thing, yes? Let's save some time," Metatron said, sounding much like the impatient alien Pard and closed her eyes once more.

A mere 0.5 seconds later, a tiny dot of light appeared next to Metatron and instantly transformed into a hair ornament patterned after the sun. Many more new points of light floated around in the space before them and then pulled together to produce a Japanese-style, F-type avatar reminiscent of a shrine maiden.

The materialized—although it was the Highest Level, so there was no material—Saint glanced first at Haruyuki, then Kuroyukihime, with eyes closed like the Archangel beside her, before snapping open the fan in her right hand to cover her mouth.

"Silver Crow—was it not?" Her voice was sultry. "We told you that we shift to the Highest Level once every hundred years. And yet it has not been a single year since we last met face-to-face."

"Right! I—I apologize for calling you here!" He snapped his arms up against his sides and bowed. A hundred years in the Unlimited Neutral Field was thirty-six days and twelve hours in the real world. But they definitely couldn't wait that long given the circumstances. "Um, I had an urgent request, Amaterasu—"

But the Being, a Sun God just like Inti, closed her fan again and thrust it out as she cut Haruyuki off. "And Crow, thou didst promise, yes? That thou wouldst come with an offering to our shrine, Amano Iwato, to thank us."

"R-right. Someday, I totally will..." He realized that this was basically the same thing he said to her last time, and he hurried to add, "Um, so what kind of offering specifically should I bring?"

"Indeed." The Saint sighed. "Since this irritating Archangel boasted endlessly about eating cake or some such, we request the same."

"Huh?! ...Cake?"

We had cake? Haruyuki cocked his head to one side as he looked at Metatron and finally remembered. When Fuko had shown them around Fufuan, she'd offered them some cake with tons of mysterious fruit on top. It had indeed been delicious, but he had absolutely no idea where in the Accelerated World she'd gotten it.

"Metatron, you bragged to Amaterasu about that nut cake?" he asked.

The Archangel turned her face away as she spoke, sounding slightly panicked. “I did not brag! When I told Amaterasu that I would be in locked mode for ten years, I simply supplied the information at the same time.”

“Supplied the information?” Amaterasu was glaring at Metatron. “When we requested a reproduction of the taste data, you immediately declined.”

“That is because a mere copy of the taste does not mean you have eaten it!” the Archangel snapped. “If you wish to taste this cake, then leave Amano Iwato in your true form and come to my temporary—no, my new residence.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If we attempt to go out in our true form, our first form...”

Haruyuki sort of wanted to keep listening in on this conversation between the two high-level Beings, but it was unclear when—if ever—it would end, so he desperately interjected, “Um, e-excuse me! I’ll get some cake from Master Raker and definitely bring it to Amano Iwato. But right now, we need to talk.”

The Sun Goddess glared at Haruyuki, eyes still closed. “You will not bring it ‘someday,’ but rather as soon as Metatron’s repairs are complete. Now then. What did you wish of us?”

We’re finally getting to the point, Haruyuki murmured inwardly in relief and stood taller. To explain to Amaterasu and Metatron the reason he wanted to get in touch with Rose Milady, he needed them to understand the extremely complicated situation Orchid Oracle—Megumi Wakamiya—had been placed in. He was as clumsy a speaker as ever and wanted to lean on Kuroyukihime, but he was the one who had chosen to summon Amaterasu, so he had to finish what he started.

After turning his eyes on Kuroyukihime for a moment, Haruyuki faced the two high-level Beings, and began to tell them everything he knew.



“My, my... I do feel as though I fell right into your trap,” Kuroyukihime muttered after returning to the real world, as she removed the XSB cable from her neck and handed it back to Haruyuki.

“T-trap? It wasn’t...” Shaking his head back and forth, he shoved the cable into his pocket before pushing the plate in the center of the table toward Kuroyukihime. “But you won the duel, so please enjoy the sandwich!”

“Fine. I will.” She picked up the sun-dried tomato, mozzarella cheese, and arugula sandwich and bit into one end with a crunch. They still had the lemon tart waiting in the fridge for dessert, but even Haruyuki was full, so it looked like they would have to leave it until tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Meaning the day following today. In other words, unless they went to bed and woke up again, tomorrow would not come. The instant he thought about this matter-of-fact detail, what Kuroyukihime had said an hour earlier replayed over and over in his brain.

Please... Would you stay with me tonight?

Haruyuki had replied that of course he would, but it was unclear exactly what specific meaning “tonight” held in Kuroyukihime’s mind. Was it until some time that was a little late for a junior high schooler—for instance, around nine? Or was it around midnight, a time at which there was a possibility that a warning might come flying at him from a police officer if he were caught on the social cameras walking alone? Or even longer than that—until morning—which, while eliminating the risk of any legal issues, would generate an entirely different, extremely large problem?

Whichever it was, he needed to mail his mother as soon as possible, but the details of that message would also change depending on the time he expected to return home. If it was the middle of the night or the next morning, he might have to enlist Takumu’s help.

Haruyuki continued to examine these alternatives as quickly as his brain could process them, while Kuroyukihime finished the small sandwich and drank the soup left in her cup before letting out a sigh.

“Aah, I’m really full. I can’t remember the last time I pushed myself this far.”

“I-I-I-I’m sorry. I bought too much...” Haruyuki hurriedly bowed his head, and Kuroyukihime grinned.

“No need to apologize. What you said was simply the truth.”

“Hmm? What did I say?”

“That if I ate, I’d feel better.”

“Oh, r-right.” He nodded.

“I do indeed feel better,” she told him. “I guess eating really is important. And I got to duel with you again for the first time in a while. Plus, I went to the Highest Level, and we saw Metatron and Amaterasu. Though it is too bad we didn’t get to see Grumpy.”

“Yeah.” He nodded again slowly.

After hearing Haruyuki out in the Highest Level, the Saint Amaterasu had tried to contact Rose Milady, but unfortunately, she got no response. The link between Amaterasu and Rose Milady apparently didn’t reach the Lowest Level of the real world, so it was no wonder she couldn’t get ahold of the Burst Linker. In the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field, where time flowed a thousand times faster, the probability of someone you knew diving at the same time as you was extremely low.

But Amaterasu said she would give Rose Milady the message the next time she spoke with her, so Haruyuki told her the anonymous mail address—in this case, *anonymous* meant not tied to his Neurolinker—that he used for contact with any number of Burst Linkers. It was a rather novel and unsettling experience to speak the characters of that address out loud, but apparently, there was no fundamental difference in the Highest Level between speaking out loud and writing in text.

He had absolutely no idea when Rose would get his message or if she would actually contact him, assuming she did get it. If they heard nothing by the next day, they would move on the issue of Megumi Wakamiya without her help.

“Yesterday, you said that if you could, you wanted to get Rose out of Oscillatory, too, and have her join Nega Nebulus, right?” Haruyuki asked softly, and Kuroyukihime nodded. “Is that... actually possible? The people of the White Legion I’ve come into contact with—Behemoth, Fairy... even Platinum Cavalier who put you and the kings in the Unlimited EK—they’re not like the people in the Acceleration Research Society; I get the feeling they’re not bad guys... Oh! I-I’m sorry for saying something like that.”

“No, it’s fine.” She shook her head. “I understand what you’re trying to say. So?”

“Um, I don’t know, it’s like, those people, they know that what

they're doing is causing so much suffering in the Accelerated World, but they think they have to do it for whatever reason. I think Rose's probably like that, too. On the Highest Level... she said that Oscillatory had its own reasons for fighting, and those reasons were totally incompatible with Negabu's."

Kuroyukihime remained silent for a while and stared at the cup of soup in her hands. Finally, she put the cup down and looked at him. Her clear, black eyes narrowed as though she were in some kind of pain.

"My sister... my parent the White King manipulated me with false information and maneuvered so that I would drive the former Red King to total point loss. I've told you that before, yes?"

"Y-yes...", he said.

The first Legion Master of Prominence, Red Rider, had created and distributed seven guns with his Arms Creation ability as a sign of the friendship of the Seven Kings. These guns, named the Seven Roads, were revolvers, and the seven-round magazine was loaded with bullets of seven different colors, but the guns were set so that the bullets wouldn't be fired even if the trigger was pulled.

But the White King fed Kuroyukihime the false information that the guns were weapons of mutually assured destruction with explosive force akin to a nuclear missile, and that by distributing these, the Red King was trying to make the mutual nonaggression pact of the seven great Legions absolute and eternal. This had been three years earlier, when Kuroyukihime was in grade six.

At the time, Kuroyukihime had insisted that all Burst Linkers should fight to reach level ten, but even so, she had a friendly rivalry with the other kings—at the very least, they had mutual respect for one another as comrades. However, the incredible power of the Road the White King had test-fired before her was so great that it ripped the buildings of the field out by their foundations, and backed Kuroyukihime up against a wall. Convinced that she would never become level ten if the guns were there to function as deterrents, she launched a surprise attack on Red Rider at the meeting of the Seven Kings and drove him to total point loss through the sudden-death rule.

"I've always thought about it like this," Kuroyukihime said. "Cosmos needed Rider out of the picture for some reason, so she got me to do the dirty work. In fact, Cosmos manipulated the regenerated Rider and forced him to make the ISS kits, but... lately, I've sort of wondered..."

Haruyuki forgot to breathe as he stared at her face. He felt a kind of ephemerality from her, like if he blinked even once, she'd vanish before his eyes. He braced himself.

"Am I not still being manipulated by Cosmos even now? Perhaps

my role wasn't finished at driving Rider to total point loss; perhaps it was just part of the process... The present situation, the hostility with Cosmos, Oscillatory in more or less of a tight spot—am I still just being made to dance in Cosmos's palm?"

"That's..." Haruyuki shook his head as hard as he could. "There's no way! In the Territories yesterday, Oscillatory—Black Vise definitely planned to drive us all to total point loss. And at the meeting of the Seven Kings today, too, the strategy of pushing you and the other kings into Unlimited EK was basically an act of desperation. The White King's been painted into a corner, too... The fact that the ISS kit main body was destroyed, the fact that the true nature of the Acceleration Research Society was exposed—No, even before that, there was no way the White King was expecting you to bring Nega Nebulus back to life!"

In his ardor, Haruyuki leaned too far forward and lost his balance, almost falling out of his chair before catching himself on the table. Watching him, Kuroyukihime chuckled.

"I suppose," she offered. "You're working so hard, and yet I'm so uncertain. I can't stand before the Legion like this. You and Fuko both saw right through me—I am more than a little shaken up by my first Unlimited EK, but now that I think about it, Utai and Akira both endured the same situation for two years. Graph alone managed something under his own power, apparently."

"K-Kuroyukihime, please stop," he begged. "I mean, it's not like Graph managed to entirely escape from the domain of the God Genbu. He fled inside the Castle and now he's stuck there."

"Hee-hee, I know," she said. "We'll likely end up discussing an escape strategy at the Legion meeting tonight, but I'm not in a hurry anymore. It has no effect on the Territories or normal duels, and I think we could take care of it once the general attack on Oscillatory is finished."

"... Right," Haruyuki agreed, resisting the urge to tell her that he would rescue her as soon as he could.

He had already personally experienced the terror of the Sun God Inti. Even the metal-color Silver Crow would be vaporized in less than a minute if he charged in recklessly. When Haruyuki asked Amaterasu, also a Sun God, about an attack strategy for Inti, she'd simply said with a grim look, "We do not wish to be involved with that fireball. Apologies." So if he wanted to rescue Kuroyukihime, it would take more than a reckless suicide attack; he needed to hammer out a serious plan with his comrades.

"Getting back to the matter at hand," Kuroyukihime started, her tone relaxed, "I also feel that the members of Oscillatory and the executive branch of the Seven Dwarves are moving based on a

particular mindset, a mental readiness, just as you said before. If Rose also shares that mindset, then she won't be able to leave the Legion so easily. And Cosmos would not hesitate to use the Judgment Blow on any subordinates who went over to the enemy's side. But that doesn't mean there isn't a slim possibility."

"Wh-what kind of possibility?" he asked.

"If her feelings for Orchid Oracle and Saffron Blossom are greater than the weight of this mental preparation..."

Her words gave Haruyuki's memory a powerful jolt. He heard Rose's voice played back deep in his mind.

"I'll do what has to be done for Orchid Oracle's sake, and for Saffron Blossom's," he recited. "That's what Rose said before she vanished from the Highest Level. Did... Did she mean that she would betray the White King?"

"I don't know," she said. She picked up her soup cup, but then realized it was empty and set it back down. "Let's have some tea. Is iced all right?"

"Yes, of course," Haruyuki hurried to reply as Kuroyukihime stood up. "Um, I'll clear the table."

"All right. How about we do that together?"

They put the empty plates into the dishwasher, tossed the bioplastic packages into the disposal, and waited for the water to boil. Haruyuki thought this would be the right moment to confirm the nuance of "tonight," but the high-tech kettle boiled the half liter of water in the blink of an eye, and he lost his chance.

Kuroyukihime made the tea a little on the strong side with black tea leaves from a can. She carried the tea to the table together with glasses of ice. The moment the tea finished steeping, she poured the ruby liquid from the pot into the glasses, and the light sound of crackling filled the air.

Haruyuki was not the biggest fan of straight black tea, but it smelled so good that he brought it to his lips as is, and though it was a *little* bitter, it was still refreshing and he tasted a hazy sweetness, even though she hadn't added any sugar. The fragrance that spread throughout his nose after he took a sip was florid like wine grapes.

"This is really good."

The instant he gave her his impressions with his limited vocabulary, Kuroyukihime put on a smile.

"It was a present from Megumi. Second-flush Darjeeling. That's what they call tea leaves picked in the region from May through June."

"Huh. Wait." He paused. "I thought black tea had a whole fermentation process? It's still only July, but you can already get this in Japan?"

“You’re very perceptive.” She smiled. “It’s apparently the first second-flush shipment they received this year at the tea shop Megumi always goes to. She gave it to me on the day of our last student council meeting of the first term...”

Once more, a smile crossed her face, this time tinged with a slight sadness, and Kuroyukihime picked up her glass. For a moment, she focused on enjoying the tea, and then she began to speak again.

“On the same day, I gave her a teaspoon I found in a shop in Koenji. We stopped at a café after school and chatted endlessly. I thought we’d have many more days like that. But I didn’t know anything about Megumi—no, I didn’t even try to learn more about her.”

“Then you can just find out.” Haruyuki’s mouth moved more smoothly than normal, perhaps thanks to the cold tea. “I mean, I think there’s still a ton of things I don’t know about you, Kuroyukihime. And it’s not like you know everything about me, right? We could spend decades learning about each other and still never know it all... That’s exactly why other people are interesting. And that’s why it’s fun to be with them, right?”

Kuroyukihime blinked carefully twice, and her face loosened into a smile. “It surprises me, to hear words like that from you. Even though I told you back when we met that I wished for nothing more than that.”

“Gah... I-I’m sorry.” He squirmed in his chair. She had indeed said something like that.

“No need to apologize.” She laughed merrily. “You’re exactly right. I can learn about her little by little from now on. Another reason I have to get Megumi back.”

“Right!” He nodded forcefully, and the ice clinked against his glass, as if in agreement.

By the time they finished their iced tea, the clock had struck eight. The Legion meeting was at 8:30 PM, but he needed to message his mother before that. Except how could he find out what Kuroyukihime *really* meant by the word “tonight”? Maybe he could say he should be getting home soon? But even assuming this made her sad or disappointed her, she wouldn’t say anything. And all of this was pointless if he couldn’t be with her when she was going through her hardest times.

“That reminds me, Haruyuki,” Kuroyukihime said, as he sat on his chair agonizing. “Don’t you need to message your mother?”

“Hieh?!” He practically jumped into the air.

“Not ‘hieh.’” She frowned. “You’re still in junior high; you have to do these things right.”

“R-r-r-right. I am gravely aware of that.”

But what am I supposed to tell her?!

Unable to ask this question, he moved an awkward hand and launched the messaging app on his virtual desktop. Staring at the blank window, he earnestly racked his brain and finally sent his mother the short message “I’m doing summer homework at a friend’s, so I’ll be home late. Or I might stay over.” A few seconds later, he received the reply “Make sure you don’t overstay your welcome,” so he let out a sigh of relief and closed the app.

“What did your mother say?” Kuroyukihime asked immediately.

“Um, not to impose,” Haruyuki told her.

“Oh?” She also seemed to be relieved.

“Actually,” he added timidly, “I told her we were doing summer homework, so...”

“Ha-ha! I see. In that case, we can’t let that be a lie. After the meeting, I’ll take a serious look at your homework for you.”

“P-please and thank you,” he replied, but he couldn’t help but shout in his head, *How many hours will a “serious look” take?!*

After they cleared away the glasses, they moved from the dining table to the living room. It was sparsely furnished with nothing but a circular beanbag chair, a wall shelf, and a ninety-centimeter aquarium in the southeast corner, which drew the eye. Haruyuki trotted over to it and peeked inside.

The only animals were twenty or so small tropical fish; the stars of the tank were the artfully arranged sea plants. The most spectacular of these was a tropical water lily that stretched up from the soil toward the water’s surface, where a circular leaf rested. The last time he’d seen it, it had been just the stalk and the leaf, but now a round bud protruded from the center.

“Oh! It has a bud!” Haruyuki cried.

“Mmm, finally.” Kuroyukihime peered into the tank alongside him. “I thought it would come a little sooner, but it sure took its sweet time.”

“I can’t wait for it to bloom.”

“Mmm. Because it’s the lily you gave me,” she murmured and touched a hand to his back.

Haruyuki had brought her this water lily the previous fall. He had gone to visit Kuroyukihime in the hospital—following a car accident that had left her seriously injured—on the day she was moved from the ICU to the general ward. Or more precisely, it was the child of that plant. Haruyuki hadn’t even known the name of the plant—Lindsey Woods—but it turned out that this species of water lily produced propagules at the base of its leaves, and when a propagule was turned upside down and left to float on the water surface, it would grow roots and a new leaf, if you were lucky. Kuroyukihime had carefully

germinated the lone propagule attached to the leaf and grown it into this beautiful plant. When the bud finally opened, the flower that bloomed would be a bluish-purple color that closely resembled that of Black Lotus's overlay.

"Please tell me when it blooms. I'll come and see it."

"I promise I will," she said. "Now, it's almost time."

He glanced down and to the right and saw that the time was 8:27

PM.

Kuroyukihime gave him a push on the back to sit him down on the beanbag chair in the middle of the living room before seating herself next to him. The microbeads must have been high quality; the cushion changed shape almost like a viscous liquid and enveloped his body.

"Th-this chair's as comfortable as ever, huh?" he said, but if he were being honest, the majority of his senses were focused on Kuroyukihime's body and where his arm was touching her. Although he wanted to move a little farther away, it was an impossible task given the structure of the chair.

Meanwhile, Kuroyukihime appeared not to give a second thought to their close proximity, but rather leaned into Haruyuki and said with a laugh, "This chair corrupts people. If you're not careful, you'll fall asleep. Don't go yawning or anything during the meeting."

"H-hyah. Th-that reminds me. Who's the host for today's meeting?"

"Fuko. You might want to brace yourself."

"Huh?" He cocked his head. "For what?"

"You'll know when you see her. All right. Here we go..."

Kuroyukihime took a deep breath, and he felt her slender chest expanding, which made his heart pound even harder. But he somehow managed to take in the bare minimum of air required, and—

""Direct link!""

—they spoke the voice command in unison.

First, the softness of the beanbag chair disappeared, followed by the hardness of the floor, and then his field of view whited out. Aware only of the heat of Kuroyukihime's body lingering against his arm, Haruyuki plummeted into the virtual darkness.

Transformed into his pink pig avatar for the first time in a while, Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief when his small hooves touched solid ground. Given that this was a VR space designed by Fuko—whose nicknames were ICBM and Strato-Shooter—he'd been ready for there not to even be any ground depending on her mood, but apparently, she hadn't gone that far. He lifted his head to look around.

"Eeeeeeah!" He immediately shrieked and fell flat on his backside. Instantly, laughter came from all around him.

"See? He couldn't handle it, either! I win the bet, Bell!" a redheaded girl yelled, cloaked in something a fairy-tale prince would wear. One day earlier she had been the second head of the Red Legion, Prominence, and was now the provisional Submaster of the third Nega Nebulus, the Red King aka Scarlet Rain aka Yuniko Kozuki aka Niko.

The girl standing beside her in a dress and cat ears, with gloved, cat paw hands on her hips, was Haruyuki's childhood friend and Takumu's Brain Burst child, Lime Bell aka Chiyuri Kurashima. "Aah, come *on*! You're always flying around! You should be able to deal with high places!"

"High places?" Haruyuki bounced to his feet. "Anyone would be surprised by this! I mean, a tower or a floating island or whatever's one thing, but this thing is alive!"

As he spoke, he checked his surroundings once more. No matter which direction he looked, it was blue sky and white clouds. The area at his feet was a gray plane, but it rounded off to either side, dropping down, and then rose up like a hill in front of him. Behind him, a massive boomerang-shaped gill stretched out long and thin, wavering in the air. Haruyuki and his friends were standing on the back of a creature with flowing lines, ten meters long and seven meters wide.

"Master, is this a whale?" he asked the girl avatar in the light-blue dress standing on the hill—the head of the massive creature.

"Correct, Corvus." Grinning, Sky Raker aka Fuko Kurasaki continued, the slight breeze playing with her long, flaxen hair. "Her name is Thalassa. Favorite foods: cirrocumulus and fish-scale clouds.

She hates lightning and gets a little wild going into cumulonimbus, so be careful.”

“... R-right.”

But this isn't the Unlimited Neutral Field. It's a VR space in the global network, so it's entirely up to you whether or not there are cumulonimbus clouds. He kept this remark to himself as he bobbed his head up and down.

Looking around once more, he saw that more than ten avatars were already assembled on the flying whale's enormous back. They were all different shapes and colors, but he could quickly pick out Ardor Maiden/Utai Shinomiya in her shrine maiden attire, Aqua Current/Akira Himi transformed into an otter, Cyan Pile/Takumu Mayuzumi looking like an old-timey robot, and the leopard-headed motorcycle rider Blood Leopard/Mihaya Kakei.

The three female avatars in apron dresses that strongly resembled their real-world selves were without a doubt Petit Paquet: Chocolat Puppeter/Shihoko Nago, Mint Mitten/Satomi Mito, and Plum Flipper/Yume Yuruki. The long-haired girl in the light-purple nurse's uniform with a pair of large scissors hanging at her hip was probably Magenta Scissor/Rui Odagiri. This was the former Nega Nebulus group.

After meeting each of their gazes in turn, Haruyuki turned his eyes toward the three unfamiliar avatars standing on the tail end of the whale.

Two had design elements in common with Pard. The head of the male avatar in a dark-red suit was that of a deer with large antlers. The head of the girl avatar in a dress of the same material as the suit was a porcupine with long quills. He assumed the deer was Cassis Moose, while the porcupine was Thistle Porcupine, both of the former Prominence's Triplex.

After nodding at them, Haruyuki turned to the third person and his jaw dropped. “Whoa...”

The avatar was unbelievably high quality.

Unlike the duel avatar that was automatically generated by the Brain Burst program, avatars used in the normal full-dive space were created by the users themselves. Naturally, you could use or customize ready-made data, but if you had the skills, you could build one yourself from scratch.

Haruyuki had once created a supercool—although when he thought about it now, he couldn't deny he had overdone it—black knight avatar to use on the Umesato local net, but it had been stolen from him after a few days by a bunch of hooligans. He'd been forced instead to use a pink pig avatar, part of the default set from the school, which he was also using now. He could have gone back to his black knight avatar anytime after the main hooligan disappeared, but

he continued to wear the pig avatar even now because he'd gotten used to it. And because Kuroyukihime had said she liked it.

But the craftsmanship of the avatar standing a few meters away from him far surpassed that of the black knight that Haruyuki had poured his soul into. If he were to express it in a word, perhaps that word would have been "idol." The bright-red bolero and miniskirt were processed with a glossy effect that shone in complex ways, and the ruffles and ribbons were also ridiculously detailed. And more than anything else, the avatar wearing this outfit was so vivid and alive that it didn't even look like an avatar. Haruyuki knew of only one other person who had a human avatar with this level of precision, design, and data load.

The idol avatar approached him, her long pigtails swinging smoothly. "Been a while, Silver Crow," she greeted, in a voice that had just the slightest echo of something boyish to it.

The voice was familiar, and Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. "Oh... Blaze Heart?"

"Yup." The idol avatar nodded.

"Um." He cocked his head. "How did you know I was Crow?"

Haruyuki had only fought the former Prominence's Blaze Heart in the Territories once and then seen her at the Legion merger negotiations. They'd never run into each other in a VR space, much less in the real world. So she should have had no reason for deciding that this pink pig avatar was Silver Crow... or so he thought.

The beautiful pigtailed girl blinked in slight exasperation. "Well, Lime Bell said you're always flying around, so. And Sky Raker called you Corvus."

"... O-oh, right."

"But I figured it was probably you when I first saw you, before they said anything. Good avatar. I like it."

"Ah... Th-thanks..."

It was a simple thing to say, but his heart inevitably started... well, blazing.

Behind him, he heard the clearing of a throat, followed by light footsteps. A female avatar stepped forward, clad in a long, onyx dress with black spangle butterfly wings on her back. Boasting a level of perfection that didn't pale before Blaze Heart, this was of course the avatar of the current head of Nega Nebulus, Kuroyukihime.

Gently pushing her closed parasol into the whale's back, the Black King faced Blaze. Long strands of jet-black hair and reddish-brown pigtails rippled gently in the virtual breeze.

In the Territories at the end of the previous month, Blaze Heart had told Haruyuki that it was an undeniable fact that the Black King had launched a surprise attack on the previous Red King and driven

him to total point loss, and thus she could never get along with Nega Nebulus. But she had also voted in favor of the merger with no conditions. What on earth had changed her mind? Or did her true feelings remain the same? Haruyuki still didn't know. With bated breath, he watched as the two girls faced each other.

"It's not that I've forgiven you for driving Rider to total point loss," Blaze Heart said, her voice hard.

Haruyuki wasn't the only one who tensed up at this; the original Negabu members and the Triplex also seemed on edge.

But the look on Kuroyukihime's face did not change as she nodded slowly.

"But setting that aside, I will express my gratitude for your sacrifice in saving Rain. Thanks." Blaze finished and bowed neatly.

"No." Kuroyukihime spoke at last. "I, and the other kings, didn't set out to protect Rain. It was simply that we needed her mobility to help as many of our comrades as possible escape the flames of the Sun God Inti."

Hearing this, Haruyuki glanced over to one side where Niko stood alongside Pard. She kept her arms crossed and her mouth shut.

"Still, it's a fact that you ended up in an unlimited EK 'cause of this, Lotus," Thistle Porcupine said, the bittersweet, high tone of her voice contrasting with her masculine manner of speaking. "And like... you're our LM already, so just accept our thanks."

"I see," Kuroyukihime replied, a slight wry smile rising up on her face. "Well then, allow me to say just one master-like thing to you. From now on, when I do anything for a member, there is absolutely no need to thank me."

"Hmm, spoken like a strosi mas, just like the rumors," the deer-headed Cassis Moose murmured from Thistle's side.

"Um." Haruyuki threw his arm up into the air, bewildered by just one part of this statement. "What's a 'strosi mas'?"

"A strong and silent Legion Master, boy."

"Uh... uh-huh." He took a moment to digest this. "So then what kind of master is Rain?"

"She's pretty pushy, so a push mas," Cassis replied.

"I see." Haruyuki nodded, and an angry cry came from his left.

"Hey, Cassi! How exactly am I pushy, huh?! And Crow, don't just go agreeing!!"

"Isn't what you're doing right now push—?" Haruyuki started, pig nose wiggling.

It looked like he'd gotten a hit in accidentally. Niko cleared her throat and clapped her hands together loudly, cutting him off. "An! Y! Way! This is everyone who's supposed to be at the meeting. And unlike BB, we're not accelerated here, so let's get this show on the

road, or we're gonna be here all night!"

"Rain's right," Fuko assented with a smile and gently dropped down from the whale's head to move into the center of the group. "So then it's about time we got to the main agenda. I had intended to serve as our chair, but if there are any objections..." She looked at the faces of the assembled party and quickly continued. "It appears there are not. So everyone, please sit."

Fuko snapped her fingers, and simple round chairs appeared on the whale's back, matching the size of each avatar through some unknown mechanism. Haruyuki jumped onto the mini chair that materialized right behind him and sat up straight. With all eyes on her, Fuko snapped her fingers again, showing not the slightest hint of nerves. Now, rather than chairs, a large whiteboard rose up, and the VR space began to take on the air of a lively classroom.

UI > FU, YOU SEEM LIKE A TEACHER SOMEHOW.

Utai typed in the chat window, and Moose and the other members of the former Prominence group glanced at the small shrine maiden. They couldn't have known that Utai had expressive aphasia and could only speak in her own voice in the Accelerated World. But perhaps they sensed something nonetheless and chose not to ask about the chat window.

"Goodness, I do? Then perhaps I should change clothes," Fuko replied. Smiling, she performed some deft movements in a window. The breezy light-blue dress changed into a very teacherly blouse and tight skirt, with her hair pulled up, and rimless glasses resting on her nose.

Now dressed for the role, Fuko cleared her throat and wrote in big black letters across the entire whiteboard: "Mission to subjugate the Sun God Inti."

"I explained beforehand in a mail to those of you who were not at the meeting of the Seven Kings, but..." Fuko turned around, and Takumu and Akira nodded silently. Seeing this, she continued to explain in a voice that while gentle, still carried well.

"Just in case, I'll go over the main points again. Thanks to the replay card Choco recorded for us, we were able to prove that the White Legion's Ivory Tower is the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise, and that the puppet master behind the many tragedies and upheavals in the Accelerated World is the White King, White Cosmos. But Vise changed the meeting venue into the Unlimited Neutral Field with the Incarnate technique of Wolfram Cerberus—more precisely, Orchid Oracle trapped inside of Cerberus—and dropped the Legend-class Enemy, the Sun God Inti, which had been captured with the Arc Luminary, onto the heads of the meeting participants. Although the majority managed to escape, all the kings except for Rain fell into a

state of Unlimited EK inside of Inti's flames."

As he listened to Fuko, Haruyuki hung his head; the terror, impatience, and helplessness of that instant rushed back. But then he heard a high-pitched noise and reflexively looked up.

The source was the retractable pointer Fuko held in her right hand. With modern electronic blackboards, such a thing was no longer in use, but she now resolutely rapped it against every character on the whiteboard as she continued.

"Thus, the new mission for our Nega Nebulus is to subjugate the Sun God Inti and rescue our Legion Master and the other four kings. At today's meeting, I want us to openly discuss the ways we could do this."

"Sorry. You mind if I...?" Blaze Heart asked.

Fuko encouraged her with a gesture. "Go ahead, Blaze."

"I want to check on two things before we get on with the business at hand. First, if we're going to investigate this topic, shouldn't we invite not just the members of Negabu, but also that of GW and all the Leos? And the other thing is, if it's just about rescuing the kings, we don't have to go to all the trouble of defeating Inti, right? We can just move it a few meters or something."

Now that she mentioned it, that was exactly right. From the impression he'd gotten fighting in the Territories, Haruyuki had thought that Blaze Heart was an impulsive, straightforward, and determined idol, but apparently, she was quite the theorist off the battlefield.

"About your first question." Fuko pursed her lips about 30 percent. "The reason that we did not invite guests from the other Legions is because this meeting is taking place in a dive call. Many people have their real faces reflected in their chat avatars, so the risk in having outside members is too high. In which case, why did we not have the meeting in the Accelerated World? Now that we've entered into an all-out war with Oscillatory, we don't know what could happen over there. With an opponent who can change the normal duel field into the Unlimited Neutral Field, even if we thought we completely eliminated all outsiders, we couldn't say with absolute certainty that they did not infiltrate the stage... To be honest, I don't think the security in even this private VR space is perfect."

"So then, in other words..." Niko, in her regal costume, pointed a finger at the head of the flying whale. "This location's also a measure against peepers?"

"Well, just in case, you know," Fuko agreed. "Thalassa is also set to cry out and let me know if there is any unauthorized access. Although I'd have to throw in the towel if someone was able to break *that* security."

Haruyuki whirled his head around. Only a few scattered clouds hung in the air near the whale swimming lazily high in the sky, and of course, there was no sign of any other people. But it wasn't necessarily the case that the visible was the whole truth, not only in the virtual space, but in the real world as well. Haruyuki had fallen into Dusk Taker's trap because he had neglected to be on guard about just such facts.

When he brought his gaze back to the group, Fuko glanced over and smiled as if to reassure him, and then turned to Blaze Heart once more. "And the answer to your second question is... because it seems like more fun to defeat it than to move it."

That's *the answer*?! Haruyuki panicked, but Blaze grinned broadly.

"Okay, I'm in," she said. "I'll even offer the first idea to make up for holding up the meeting. The Sun God Inti is a ball of flames that's immune to physical attacks and energy. In which case, the only way to destroy it is to douse it with lots of water. I know a bunch of Burst Linkers have had this idea before and actually tried to do it, but are any of them here?"

With this question in the air, Haruyuki and the rest of the former Nega Nebulus group looked at Akira. The otter avatar in the red glasses twitched her pointed nose unhappily.

"I refused at first, but I was forced to go along," she sighed. "Four or five years ago, I attempted to subjugate Inti together with Graphite Edge. Prepared to die at any moment, I somehow managed to guard against the heat with my flowing water armor as I pulled Inti over two kilometers and dropped it in the pond at Akasaka Goyochi."

Haruyuki had heard this story before, but now that he had personally experienced Inti's awesome heat, it was five times more frightening, and he held his breath as he listened intently to Akira.

"Inti's flames *did* weaken the instant it fell into the pond, and I thought I saw something like a core. Graph didn't let the chance get away—he sliced at it with a charging attack. But the pond, which is easily two hundred meters across, evaporated in the blink of an eye. The idiot hero ended up roasted to death and I skipped out."

All the Nega Nebulus veterans, including Kuroyukihime, laughed at Akira's biting telling of the story, but Rui and Shihoko and her friends, along with Prominence's Cassis, Thistle, and Blaze, were dumbfounded, at a loss for words.

Finally, Cassis Moose cleared his throat. "You mean the former member of the Nega Nebulus executive who has currently vanished from the scene, the dual sword user, the Anomaly, Graphite Edge?"

"The very same," Akira assented.

"I've also heard any number of anecdotes from the era when he was active," Cassis said. "But there are still many more of those heroic

sagas, it seems.”

“They’re not heroic sagas,” she disagreed. “They’re records of follies.”

“W-well, I won’t comment on that. But from what you’ve told us, the idea of cooling it with water doesn’t seem to have much promise. Blaze, what was your idea specifically?” Cassis turned to the idol to bring her back into the discussion.

Blaze Heart raised her index finger. “A pond two hundred meters wide is not enough to douse Inti’s flames. And rumor has it, the Sun God is nowhere to be found when the Unlimited Neutral Field is a water-type stage. But, like, the way things are now, Inti can’t move even if it wants to, right? So then we can just wait patiently until a Storm or Ocean comes. Don’t you think?”

“Oh... Y-yeah,” Haruyuki muttered, and looked up at the sky of the virtual space.

It was an extremely simple idea, but Blaze Heart was exactly right. Although Storm and Ocean stages didn’t appear very often, neither was as rare as a Hell or a Heaven. If they dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field and waited for ten hours in real time—about a year and two months inside—they’d definitely encounter one or the other. In fact, it would have been totally par for the course for one or both to have come over the Accelerated World during the time from the end of the meeting of the Seven Kings to the start of this gathering.

“If I’d stayed inside and kept watch...” He hung his head with regret, and a hand slapped him on the back.

“Now why are you getting all down in the dumps by yourself?” Kuroyukihime asked.

“B-because we might have already missed our chance to get you out of there,” he protested.

“Listen. Do you think I hadn’t already considered what Blaze said?”

“Huh? S-so then what do you—?” Haruyuki started, but was interrupted by Fuko clapping her hands together in front of the whiteboard to get everyone’s attention.

“This is the perfect time to call in our additional meeting member.”

Huh? Someone else is coming? Who on earth...? Haruyuki wondered, while he watched Fuko flick at her window.

A second later, a new avatar materialized with a *whoosh* on the whale’s head.

Human-shaped, Japanese-style. But instead of the usual *haori* jacket and *hakama* trousers, he wore the *noshi* robes of Heian nobility in a blue richer than that of the sky behind him. On his head was a tall black *eboshi* hat, but the face beneath was covered in a

porcelainlike mask.

The Japanese-style avatar bowed deeply, and Haruyuki leapt off his round chair. “L-Lead?! What are you doing here?!”

Standing tall again, the Japanese-style avatar walked over to Haruyuki as he spoke in a voice like a cool breeze. “What an awful thing to say, Crow. After all, I am also a member of Nega Nebulus.”

“Th-that’s true, but...” He waved his hands in a panic, and then he stopped in a moment of realization. Lead aka Trilead Tetroxide was also seeing Haruyuki’s pig avatar for the first time, just like Blaze Heart and the others. But he didn’t bother pestering his friend about this. He simply apologized instead. “Sorry, Lead, I didn’t mean to sound like you don’t belong here. I just kinda got the impression you couldn’t really dive too late at night...” From all his interactions with Trilead, he’d gotten the idea that the samurai was the son of a relatively “good” family.

“No, this hour is not a problem at all.” Lead appeared to smile beneath his mask. “And given that the situation is urgent, involving not only the Legion but the entire Accelerated World, I intend to participate in this meeting until its very end, even if it should extend into tomorrow.”

“Oh? Thanks, Lead.” Haruyuki bowed neatly, then stood on his chair, turning to face the other Legion members. “Um, I’m pretty sure some of you haven’t met before, so I’ll introduce you. This is Trilead Tetroxide. I call him Lead, though. He joined the Legion yesterday. He’s Graphite Edge’s student and a master swordsman himself.”

“I—I am far from a master,” Lead protested quickly, as he pressed his hands neatly up against his sides and bowed deeply. “I am called Trilead Tetroxide, and I was permitted to join Nega Nebulus at this time. However, this name is one given to me by my master...” He appeared to hesitate for a fleeting moment before continuing in an unshakable voice. “My formal avatar name is Azure Air. But I would be delighted if you were all to call me Lead as Crow does.”

“Roger, Lead! I’ll keep calling you that!” Chiyuri’s cat-eared avatar responded immediately.

This was also the first time Lead was seeing this version of her, but he bowed lightly again without a moment’s hesitation. “Thank you so much, Bell.”

Now that Haruyuki was thinking about it, the two of them had spent a long time together as they moved with Haruyuki and Metatron in the Territories the previous day in Minato Area No. 3. And in the final stages of the battle, Lead had carried Bell, racing across the ground covered in sharp thorns, to valiantly bring her to the battlefield before his strength gave out. After sharing an experience like that, it was only natural that they’d open up to each other.

However.

“So you’re Trilead?” Takumu said, as he stood up.

Yikes, Haruyuki muttered internally.

Even after they’d stopped going out the previous fall, it was clear that Takumu continued to have feelings for Chiyuri. In fact, the reason he kept working so hard, never letting up on his studies, his kendo, or Brain Burst, was probably because he had the unshakable goal of becoming good enough for Chiyuri once more. What must he have been feeling at the exchange between her and Lead?

This misgiving of Haruyuki’s appeared to have been needless. Stepping over to Lead, Takumu offered his hand with his usual cheerful smile.

“We finally meet. I’m Cyan Pile, a blue type like you,” he said. “My main weapon isn’t a sword, though, unfortunately. There are a lot of girls in Nega Nebulus, so I’m happy we got another boy. I’m looking forward to fighting together.”

“Likewise. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Pile.”

Watching Takumu and Lead shake hands, Haruyuki secretly breathed a sigh of relief. He felt like he saw a lightning bolt travel between them for just an instant, but that was probably all in his head, so he decided to ignore it.

“So Master, what did you mean when you said it was the perfect time to call Lead?” Haruyuki asked Fuko, once the introductions were finished. “And how did you get in touch with him in the first place?”

“I didn’t,” she replied.

“Huh?” Haruyuki cocked his head as far as it would go to one side. “But this is a closed net. How did he—Oh! I get it. Graph.”

“Exactly. I invited Graph, but our reclusive hero sent his beloved student as a messenger.”

And Haruyuki realized what kind of message Trilead had brought. Moving his gaze, he asked the young, masked samurai, “Lead, is Graph monitoring Inti in the Unlimited Neutral Field?”

“Yes.” Lead looked around at the meeting members through his white mask. “When my master Graphite Edge learned about the events of the meeting of the Seven Kings from Raker, he began voluntarily monitoring the Sun God Inti in the Castle’s Kitanomaru Park. His aim was twofold: to inform Black Lotus if there was any sign of the Acceleration Research Society moving the Sun God Inti, and to confirm what happened to Inti when the Unlimited Neutral Field changed to an Ocean or Storm stage.”

“You mind?” Rui Odagiri in her nurse’s uniform raised her hand. “So you said ‘monitor’... It’s been about seven hours and forty minutes or so in real time from the end of the meeting of the Seven Kings until your appearance here. That’s more than three hundred days in the

Unlimited Neutral Field. Monitoring any situation for that length of time would be impossible unless you had superhuman focus or the ability to decelerate like Black Vise.”

“In this case, it would be the former,” Lead replied smoothly, and added by way of explanation in a more serious tone, “Most likely, the members of the initial Nega Nebulus, his comrades in ancient battles, are well aware of this, but while Graphite Edge is normally very breezy and impossible to get ahold of, when push comes to shove, he displays unfathomable battle power and mental strength. My master appears to feel a deep remorse for Lotus and the other four kings ending up in an Unlimited EK. Thus, he volunteered personally for a grueling mission. But...”

The porcelainlike mask turned ever so slightly downward.

“Unfortunately, the message my master entrusted me with is no doubt not what you were hoping to hear. First, at present—more precisely, up until immediately before I dived into this VR space—there has been absolutely no sign that the Acceleration Research Society is planning to move Inti. And this is the main point. About four months after my master started his observation, a Storm stage appeared. A torrent of rain poured down on Inti, but for the week until the next Change came, Inti’s flames continued to burn without issue, showing no sign of weakening in the slightest.”

“B-but...!” Haruyuki protested, the image of the Archangel Metatron when she offset the blast from the Armor of Catastrophe Mark II floating up in the back of his mind. “The energy of an Enemy—a Being is limited. If it managed to evaporate that much rain, then it would have to consume an equivalent amount of power. I mean, even the God Suzaku, who’s way above Inti as a super-class Enemy, even his flames went out when we pulled him into space... There just wasn’t enough water. If it kept raining for a couple weeks or a month, Inti’s flames would go out—”

“Calm down, Crow,” Kuroyukihime rebuked him, from her seat next to him.

He came back to himself with a gasp. Trilead was only delivering the message from Graphite Edge. It wasn’t fair to attack him like that. “Sorry, Lead,” he apologized, his pig nose wiggling.

“No.” The young samurai shook his head. “I understand all too well how you feel, forced to simply sit on the sidelines and watch. I, too, wish I could have delivered even a single piece of useful information.”

“Um?”

Haruyuki looked to his right, at the source of this slightly laid-back voice.

A girl avatar in large glasses with a white apron over deep-red

puffed sleeves had a lazy hand in the air. Petit Paquet's Yume Yuruki.

"I don't think it's the case that we've got zero useful information here," she said. She stood up before continuing calmly as everyone in the space turned their attention toward her. "Trilead said Inti's flames kept burning even in a downpour, right? But when you think about it, that's kinda weird. When you dump a whole lot of water on flames super-hot enough to melt metal, I think that would create a huge amount of steam. The whole area would be white, so you couldn't see anything."

"That is indeed true." The otter avatar, Akira, nodded. "When I got Inti into the pond at Akasaka Goyochi, a thick cloud of steam puffed up over the boiling pond, and we couldn't even see the flames. I've never heard anything about Graph having enhanced sight, so it doesn't quite make sense that he could see Inti in pouring rain."

"True," Kuroyukihime said. "I'd like to have Graph himself here, so we could get the story directly from him, but..."

"I'm sorry." Trilead bowed apologetically. "I suggested to my master that it might be better for him to communicate this information himself, but he said that he is still a member of Great Wall, so he can't exactly participate in a Nega Nebulus meeting."

UI> HE'S JUST LIKE LO THAT WAY. ALWAYS HAS BEEN. THAT STUBBORN STREAK.

Fuko and the others giggled, and Kuroyukihime spread her hands before her as though upset.

"Now, now, Maiden! Just about the only thing that idiot hero and I have in common is the color of our armor. At any rate, back to the matter of the rain not turning to steam... As the name suggests, a Storm stage is not only a downpour. There's also a fierce wind, so perhaps the steam was blown away the moment it was generated?"

"No, Lotus, the wind in the Storm stage doesn't simply blow at the same fixed speed and intensity," Fuko said. "The strength and direction change at random. Sometimes, it stops dead as well. Depending on the timing, Inti should indeed have been enveloped in steam, and it's curious that Graph did not mention that."

"Mmm. There's that, too." Kuroyukihime crossed her slender legs. "But in that case, why—?"

"Um, gang? I wasn't actually done," Yume said.

Fuko, in front of the whiteboard, beckoned her with a hand. "Plum, if you don't mind, perhaps you could come here and explain?"

"Whaaaat?" Yume visibly shrank back. "That's actually a serious hurdle to clear, like..."

"Come on! Master Raker called you by name! Go! Go on!" Satomi, in her sky-blue dress, whacked her on the back, and Yume almost fell forward.

It would have taken Haruyuki twenty seconds just to calm the pounding of his heart for such a task, but Yume was surprisingly composed. She merely cleared her throat before beginning to speak, confidently. “So okay, I’ll just start with a little introduction. Um... Corvus?”

Suddenly called by name, Haruyuki felt both of his ears twitch to attention. “Huh... M-me?”

“Corvus, do you know what flames are?”

“F-flames? Um.” He thought for a second. “Red, hot, fiery...”

“That’s right, more or less!” Yume gave him two thumbs-up before explaining. “A rough definition of flames—well, fire—would be a situation where a combustible gas is oxidized while emitting heat and light. The keyword there is ‘oxidize’—in other words, combining chemically with oxygen. I naturally thought this was what Inti’s flames were, too, but hearing Lead’s story, I think it might be a little different.”

“You say ‘different.’” Cassis Moose sounded slightly baffled. “Are there flames that *aren’t* an oxidation reaction?”

“There aaaare,” Yume sang. “For instance, if you ignite a mixture of hydrogen chloride and hydrogen, it will burn even without oxygen. And if you cause a reaction between fluorine and hydrogen, it will explode without ignition. But I don’t even have to give you these kinds of chemistry experiment examples. You all see flames that aren’t oxidation pretty much every day.”

Every day? Where? Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, puzzled, but Takumu and Lead both called out at the same time.

“Right... The sun!”

“It’s the sun!”

And then Kuroyukihime nodded. “I see. Indeed, the sun’s—a fixed star’s—‘flames’ are a product of nuclear fusion, so they do not require oxygen. In other words, Plum, you’re saying that Inti’s flames are also —”

“Whoa, well, before that.” Pushing back at Kuroyukihime’s question with both hands, Yume turned her gaze on Haruyuki once again. “Okay, now it’s Corvus!”

“M-me again?!” He gaped.

“Supposing you had an unlimited quantity of water in space—well, I guess it’d freeze and be ice, but if you kept tossing that at the sun with all your might, do you think you’d be able to put the fire out at some point?”

“T-toss... Um, ummmm.” Wiggling his pig ears, he thought intently. “Even if the flames of the sun are nuclear fusion and not oxidization, it’s like the fuel source is unlimited, right? So that means if the amount of water’s infinite and I keep tossing it on there, the

sun'll run out of energy at some point and the fire will go out... Won't it?"

"Incorrect!" This time, Yume turned her thumbs down and grinned. "Well, it's not like I've actually gone out and done it myself. This is all theory here. If you threw water at the sun, the water would first vaporize and turn into steam. It's true that this would rob the sun of some amount of heat, but the generated water vapor—i.e., the H_2O —would thermally decompose due to the surface temperature, which exceeds five thousand degrees, and separate into hydrogen and oxygen."

"Hydrogen and oxygen..." Haruyuki repeated, and then flapped his hands in the air. "Th-that's no good! I mean, the sun fuses hydrogen in its nuclear reaction, right? If you throw hydrogen on there, it'll just have more fuel!"

"Bingo!" Yume turned her thumbs up again and added, "Incidentally, the oxygen generated in thermal decomposition is also used up in this thing called the sun's CNO cycle and also becomes energy, so that's no good, either. To sum it all up, not only will you *not* be able to put out the fire of the sun with an infinite amount of water, you'll actually make it burn even moooore."

She cleared her throat as if to change gears, and the eyes behind her glasses grew serious as she looked around at the assembled group.

"Of course, I also don't think the Sun God Inti is just like the real sun in every little detail. But if nothing else, I do think there's a possibility the flames are not an oxidation reaction but rather nuclear fusion. Although this is a hypothesis at best. But if it's true, then Inti's flames cannot be put out with water. If you drop it into a lake, let the rain fall on it, whatever, it will just decompose every drop of water that touches it and turn it into its own fuel. The reason there was steam when it was pushed into the lake was because the lake water boiled from the heat. And the reason there was no steam in the rain is because the tiny rain drops decomposed into hydrogen and oxygen without the time to turn to steam first."

When Yume finished, the group was quiet for a minute.

"At best a hypothesis," she said, but having been subjected to Inti's superheat if only for an instant, the idea that those flames were due to nuclear fusion was very persuasive for Haruyuki.

"So then..." He heard his own dry voice spill out of his mouth. "So then Inti's flames won't disappear in space, unlike Suzaku's. Even without oxygen, they'll just keep burning. How are we supposed to put out flames like that...?"

Yume simply shook her head before she bowed and returned to her own seat.

A few seconds of heavy silence followed, which was eventually

broken by a firm voice.

“You don’t put the fire out, Crow.” Niko leapt to her feet. “And o’course, you don’t roll it over, either. What we’re aiming for here is taking down the big egg! It might be all nuclear fusion, but that’s still an Enemy. Meaning it’s gotta have a health gauge, yeah? We bring that to zero and knock it into next week. That’s the sole unshakable fact here!” She clenched one hand into a tight fist.

Haruyuki unconsciously started to clap. Soon, Kuroyukihime and then everyone also brought their hands together, and the back of the whale was briefly filled with lively applause.

Once Niko had waved away their accolades with the embarrassment that she dressed up as a sullen look, Kuroyukihime also stood.

“It’s just as Rain says. I realize that I am the one awaiting rescue, but we have a chance to accomplish the monumental feat of being the first in the Accelerated World to defeat the Sun God Inti. We won’t be able to clear this mission unless we take on the challenge with that kind of fighting spirit. Naturally, it won’t be easy. But there absolutely *has* to be a way. I believe two enormous mysteries are the key to this.”

“T-two mysteries?” Haruyuki blinked rapidly.

“Yes.” Kuroyukihime looked down at him. “The Acceleration Research Society tamed Inti with the power of the Arc Luminary, hid it above the clouds, and dropped it on Black Vise after he activated his Icosahedral Insulation. They may be our enemy, but this was a marvelous strategy. But as for the two unsolved mysteries... One is how they raised Inti above the clouds when it has only rolled along the ground thus far. And the other is why Inti’s heat does not break the thorned crown the Luminary grants to the targets of its taming.”

“Oh... Th-that’s true.” Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down. “When we fought Metatron’s first form at Tokyo Midtown Tower after it had been tamed the same way as Inti, I smashed the Luminary crown with a physical attack. And then the taming spell was released, and Metatron couldn’t move anymore... That crown’s not an indestructible object, and yet it doesn’t melt in Inti’s flames. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Hang on. So that means...” Niko’s expression was hard to read. “So long as we smash that thorned crown, we can get Inti to roll off somewhere without killing it, and Lotus and the others’ll be able to regenerate?”

“M-maybe,” Haruyuki said. “But if you think about it the other way, how are we supposed to break something that Inti’s flames can’t? Maybe our only choice is to defeat Inti after all.”

Niko’s sour look didn’t go away. She shifted her gaze to Kuroyukihime and spread out her white-gloved hands. “Lotus, how

the heck is the Luminary crown a hint in how we subjugate Inti?"

"It's simple." The beauty in the black dress raised her parasol like a sword. "If we obtain a weapon with the same ability as that crown—able to endure even Inti's superheat—we plunge it into the nuclear fusion flames and damage the body... perhaps."

"Perhaps?" Smiling wryly, Niko nodded, setting her ponytails swinging. "But, like, okay, yeah, that does make sense. Hmm. What kinda sense is there in the crown Crow could destroy with his little chops twenty days ago now being able to withstand five-thousand-degree heat? Physical attacks work, but it's resistant to fire attacks?"

"Inti's flames are not something we can squeeze into the usual affinities," the Black King noted. "Iron Pound was among the avatars captured by the Icosahedral Insulation, and he's resistant to heat. But his health gauge basically declined as fast as any of the others. If it is not as a rule indestructible, then even the ground itself will melt."

"Right, right," Niko muttered. "So then that means that in a mere twenty days, there was some kind of decisive change with the Luminary. That thing... Is it just maybe, you know...?"

Kuroyukihime nodded wordlessly, and the two girls looked at each other with hard faces.

"Rain? What do you mean by 'you know'?" Haruyuki asked.

"'You know' is like..." She paused. "An urban legend? Nah, an AW legend kinda thing."

Guessing that "AW" meant the Accelerated World, Haruyuki nodded and waited for her to continue. Niko gave him a steady glare before she spoke again, tugging on the large collar of her princely costume.

"I don't think it's just me. I bet Lotus and the rest of the executive's never actually seen it, either. There's been this rumor for ages of a blacksmith in the Unlimited Neutral Field."

"A-a blacksmith?" Takumu parroted.

Sitting next to him, Chiyuri tilted her pointed hat to one side. "So does that have something to do with the Legion Master before you, Rain—Red Rider? He could make whatever Enhanced Armament he wanted, right?"

"Nah, shouldn't have anything to do with my predecessor," Niko replied. "The blacksmith, it's this wagon shop that drifts around the Unlimited Neutral Field. If you find it, you can get them to make you the Enhanced Armament you want, enhance whatever Enhanced Armament you got... Takes points, though, natch. That's the rumor."

"Enhance an Enhanced Armament," Chiyuri murmured, and the words melted into the gentle breeze and disappeared.

The whale didn't seem the least concerned about how things were going with the meeting being held on her back, and was instead

swimming peacefully through the vast blue sky. Each time a massive cotton-candy cloud passed by, his avatar's skin grew chilled.

"So that means..." Haruyuki said, his imagination going full throttle, since he had never even seen a normal shop, much less this blacksmith. "So that means the White King found this blacksmith and enhanced the Luminary... Is that it? That's why it can withstand Inti's flames?"

"It's a guess. No proof, though. But I can't think of any other reason. And if my guess is right, then I can see a tiny opening when it comes to attacking the thing." Niko stopped there and slid a slender saber from the red scabbard at her hip. Naturally, it had absolutely no attack power—to start with, the avatars gathered in this VR space didn't possess so much as the concept of a health gauge—but when Niko turned the tip of this blade toward Haruyuki's pig nose, she grinned boldly.

"We take the most powerful Enhanced Armament of any of our Legion members and get the blacksmith to enhance it even more so it can pierce Inti's flames. Oscillatory managed to do it, so there's no way we can't too, yeah? So then, like, who has the most powerful Enhanced Armament in Negabu right now?"

Niko looked around at her comrades, and Haruyuki hurried to answer.

"That's obviously you, Rain. You can scour the entire Accelerated World but you won't find too many Enhanced Armaments as tough as Invincible."

"Now, look..." Instantly, Niko was at maximum exasperation, and she jabbed her sword at his nose. "Setting aside the whole strength issue, my Invincible's long-range firepower only. Enhance it all you want, but it's just fire on oil to Inti."

"Oh! R-right. If we go in the same direction as the Luminary, then it'd have to be at close range and physical... H-hang on a sec." Haruyuki used his hooves to grab the blade of the saber in his face with a bare-handed sword catch as he stood up. "A close-range, physical Enhanced Armament, that'd be a sword or a lance or a hammer or something, right? Even if we get one enhanced at the blacksmith so it could withstand Inti's flames, the user'd have to get within the weapon's range, so wouldn't they get burned up by the flames anyway?"

"Not necessarily." Blood Leopard spoke for the first time that day.

The leopard-headed avatar, slender body wrapped in a black leather riding suit, flicked her long tail back and forth as she calmly talked.

"When we were escaping from Inti's heat-death zone after it dropped on us, me and Suntan Chafer in the rear were prepared to die

along the way. But thanks to Lime Bell's Citron Call, we both made it out alive. That's really an amazing power. I personally think it could be counted among the greatest techniques in the Accelerated World alongside Metatron's Trisagion and Orchid Oracle's Paradigm Breakdown."

"... Th-the greatest..." Haruyuki repeated, swallowing hard. He'd thought the same thing. But the idea took on a new level of persuasiveness coming from Pard, a high ranker of established rapport. He timidly turned his gaze toward Chiyuri, wondering exactly how she would take this.

The avatar with the cat ears in the white dress pressed a glove/paw to the back of her head and chuckled nonchalantly. "Heh-heh-heh-heh! Naaaah, it's not that great."

Haruyuki practically slid to the ground from where he stood on his chair, but he managed to somehow stay on his feet as he turned to Pard. "W-well, anyway, Citron Call's helped me out any number of times, too. But the special-attack gauge consumption's no joke. Just healing one time wouldn't increase the amount of time you could stay in Inti's heat-death zone all that much, would it?"

"Hey, Crow! *I'm* the one who gets to say stuff like that, you know?!" Chiyuri interjected and pinched his pig cheek, so Haruyuki—not to be outdone—yanked on the cat avatar's tail.

"You were all 'Heh-heh-heh-heh!'"

"Of course I'd be happy to get a compliment!" she snapped. "You should try not being so humble all the time and maybe be more 'I'm a genius' sometimes!"

"H-how could I say that?!" he shouted. "But, like, do you think it'd be cool if I did?!"

"People would be creeped right out, obviously!" She rolled her eyes at him.

"S-so then why are you trying to get me to say it?!"

While the two of them were sniping at each other, the members of Petit Paquet burst out laughing, and as if she could stand it no longer, Rui Odagiri also erupted in sound. The bright circle of laughter spread quickly to everyone there, and when he looked back, he saw Kuroyukihime's shoulders were also shaking as she hid her mouth with her parasol.

Feeling just a little relieved at this reaction, Haruyuki brought his gaze back to Pard. The leopard cleared her throat as if she was trying to suppress a laugh before she muttered "SRY" and continued with her explanation.

"It's true the special-attack gauge consumption is a critical problem. But in the Accelerated World, the synergy to realize successive special-attack gauge charges has been studied since the

long-distant past, and while there aren't many, there are some Burst Linkers who have techniques that allow for a single charge. It shouldn't be hard to pull in the Blue, Green, Yellow, and Purple Legions since their kings are in an Unlimited EK with Lotus, so we might be able to put together the first five-Legion synergy."

"Oh... M-makes sense," Haruyuki muttered, and the first thing he remembered was the Purple King's special-attack Elementary Charge.

When she touched a duel avatar with her staff, she could recover their special-attack gauge by 1.60217662 times her own gauge's consumption amount. He'd wondered why it was such a random number, so he'd looked it up after leaving the Unlimited Neutral Field and found that "elementary charge" was a physics term and that the number in question was part of an equation expressing that. At any rate, it was a technique that could have functioned as a high-power booster if they managed to put together this synergy, but regrettably, Purple Thorn was together with Kuroyukihime in the Unlimited EK. Still, Pard was right: There were other avatars in the Accelerated World who could recharge other people's gauges.

"In other words, we combine the techniques and abilities of a group of Burst Linkers to create something like a huge energy tank and keep replenishing Bell's special-attack gauge. It's true... if we did that, we might be able to hit Inti with close-up attacks a few times!" Haruyuki shouted.

"But," Pard quickly added, although she nodded her leopard head, "for this strategy, we need to clear three hurdles: we have to get a close-range, physical-type Enhanced Armament powerful enough to do serious damage to Inti in a single blow; we have to prove the existence of a blacksmith shop in the Unlimited Neutral Field; and we have to enhance the Enhanced Armament so that it can withstand flames of five thousand degrees. To be honest, any one of them is still an optimistic guess."

After thinking for a second, Haruyuki shook his head from side to side. "No. The first one's probably okay. In the current Nega Nebulus, we have someone with a sword in the most powerful class in the Accelerated World. Right, Lead?"

Standing next to the whiteboard, the young masked samurai looked up at the sound of his name and almost shrugged as he nodded firmly. "Yes. Although the sequence of events that led to me obtaining it is very much not something I can be proud of... the power of it is no lie. If the Infinity, 'gyokusho,' one of the Seven Arcs, could withstand even flames, then I believe it could do a not-insignificant amount of damage to the Sun God."

The instant Lead spoke the name of the Arc, Cassis Moose, Thistle Porcupine, and the other former members of Prominence started to

murmur excitedly.

Currently, there were six Arcs in the Accelerated World whose owners were known. Of these, the Luminary was held by the White King, and the Destiny had been sealed away by Haruyuki's own hand. The Impulse with the Blue King, the Strife with the Green King, and the Tempest with the Purple King had fallen into an Unlimited EK, so the only Arc available for use in this mission was for all intents and purposes Trilead's Infinity.

"Trilead..." Kuroyukihime stepped away from her chair and spoke to the young samurai with a serious look on her face. "Positioning your Infinity as the main pillar of the Inti subjugation mission means that you would be assigned to attack alone. Given that a single misstep might cause you to fall into an Unlimited EK yourself, I hate to press such a dangerous role on you, especially when it has only been a single day since you joined the Legion. Are you sure?"

"Of course," Lead answered immediately. "For a long time, all I knew was the inside of the Castle's high walls. Crow and Raker risked the danger of Unlimited EK at the altar of the God Suzaku to bring me out. I don't believe that my master Graphite Edge instructed me to leave the Castle in anticipation of this situation. Even so, I'm sure of it... That I left the Castle in order to carry out the role given to me in the subjugation mission to come."

"I see. When you sound so certain, I cannot hesitate, either. Trilead... I'm counting on you." Kuroyukihime bowed her head deeply.

Lead bowed back just as deeply, ever so politely. "Please leave everything to me, Master!"

So I guess now there are two people who call her Master.

Haruyuki felt a shiver run up his spine, but rather than saying the thought out loud, he simply said, "So we've cleared the first hurdle in this mission! Now we just need the blacksmith!"

"That blacksmith is a problem, though." Grinning cynically, Kuroyukihime looked at him and then Fuko. "That reminds me. The entirety of the Unlimited Neutral Field is visible from the Highest Level, yes? Couldn't we look for the blacksmith wagon from there?"

"Oh..." His jaw dropped. He hadn't even considered that possibility. But after a moment, he could only offer a negative response. "No, that's probably impossible. You *do* get a bird's-eye view of the Mean Level if you go to the Highest Level. But the terrain, the Enemies, the Burst Linkers—they're all expressed as little dots, so to find out what it is you're looking at, you have to leave the Highest Level and go to the actual spot."

"Ohh, I see." She nodded. "But we might be able to get a fix on an area. If the blacksmith wagon exists as it is rumored to, it supposedly

moves around not in the shopping areas of each region, but rather alone through the wastelands. It would be hard to tell it apart from Enemies, but I think this way would be better than racing around the Unlimited Neutral Field blindly with no idea at all.”

“You’re right about that,” he agreed, but something else nagged at him.

He couldn’t shift to the Highest Level under his own power. Once he accelerated, he had to contact Metatron and get her to lift his consciousness. But at the moment, she was resting at Fufuan to recover the body of information she’d lost, and it would be ten years in Accelerated World time before that was complete—three days in real world time. She’d said it was a “mere” three days, but that was far too long in their current situation.

If they needed to search the Highest Level to find the blacksmith, Haruyuki himself was prepared to see it through no matter how many months or years of subjective time it took, but he was reluctant to disrupt Metatron’s sleep once more for that. He struggled with how exactly to explain all this.

“Crow, no need to worry,” Kuroyukihime said gently, as if sensing Haruyuki’s anxiety. “I also have no intention of dragging Metatron into this mission. As a member of Nega Nebulus, she carried out a full-throttle suicide attack in the Territories with Oscillatory when the stage was transformed into Hell and rescued us from a desperate situation. We won’t do anything to disrupt her sleep until those wounds are completely healed. Even if she herself gets angry with us after the fact.”

“R-right. But getting to the Highest Level by myself is...”

“There are other Saints besides Metatron... yes?” Kuroyukihime asked, and Haruyuki simply blinked, frozen. Without another word, Kuroyukihime patted his pig avatar’s head and turned toward the Legion members to speak in a resolute voice.

“I think we’ve firmed up a skeleton of a strategy in the discussion up to this point. Our final objective is to crush the Sun God Inti—to that end, we enhance Trilead Tetroxide’s Arc Infinity at the blacksmith and construct a multilayered synergy to continuously charge Lime Bell’s special-attack gauge in parallel. For both of these objectives, we will call for cooperation from the other four Legions and plan for the quick execution. Are there any questions?”

Immediately, Thistle thrust her hand into the air. “Just one. What about the general attack on the White Legion that was decided on before the meeting of the Seven Kings got turned upside down? If we’re gonna do both missions at once, we’ll have to divide our members up for the attack on Minato area.”

“Hmm, true.” Kuroyukihime placed a hand on her slender jaw, as

if kicking her thoughts into gear.

“You’re right, Pokki,” Fuko said. “Purple Thorn and Blue Knight made the announcement right before the meeting turned into the Unlimited Neutral Field. As soon as we were done there, a joint force of the five Legions of Blue, Green, Purple, Yellow, and Black would begin a general attack on the areas of Minato One, Two, and Three. More concretely, if any members of Oscillatory were found on the matching list, they would be continuously challenged and pushed to total point loss. Moreover, in the next Territories, we would attack Minato One and Two and strip them of their rights to the territories... But as of right now, we haven’t moved to carry that mission out. Most likely, none of the Legions have yet determined a policy on how to handle the abnormal situation of their masters being in Unlimited EK.”

“That mean the general attack’s postponed for now?” Thistle asked.

“Yeah, I guess, but I don’t like how things are turning out here one bit.” Niko snorted. “I know how it sounds, me talking when I’m the only one who escaped the heat-death zone... But I think this sitch’s fundamentally beyond Oscillatory expectations, too. That Ivory woulda kept on playing like he didn’t know or do a darned thing if Chocolat hadn’t recorded his transformation with the replay card. So I think they prob’ly aren’t ready for a general attack from the five Legions yet. We can’t let this chance get away from us, but it’s like offensive. Gross.”

Niko clasped her hands behind her head and pursed her lips in classic “pouting child” pose, and Kuroyukihime laughed dryly.

“To be honest,” she said, “I thought rescuing us from inside of Inti could come after the general attack on Oscillatory. Even if we can’t dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, there’s nothing keeping us from the normal duel field or the Territories. But I don’t know what the other Legions are thinking. We need to hold at least one more executive meeting so we can align our intentions toward the general attack. At present, that won’t be easy, either.”

“Vise’s underlings will sneak into that meeting, too, and mess it all up again,” Niko groaned. “It’s plenty possible, yeah.”

“To avoid that...,” Kuroyukihime started, but then quickly shook her head, murmuring, “No, that’s impossible right from the start.”

“C’mon, Lotus!” Niko thrust her head forward. “Finish what you —” But she also was unable to bring her sentence to an end.

Behind the whiteboard, a pillar of light shimmered down onto the top of the whale’s head. A new avatar materialized.

A slight, slender girl type. The short hair was fluffy, but she was wearing a black leather shirt covered in countless silver studs and a

ripped-up pair of cut-off jeans. It was hard to tell whether she was girly or punk. No sooner had the avatar opened her cute, round eyes than she was running toward Haruyuki. She didn't hesitate to lift his pig avatar into an embrace with both arms.

"A—Crow!!" The punk girl had most likely been about to say "Arita," and now she squeezed him with all her might, causing Haruyuki to flail his piggy body around and around.

"R—Ash!" Haruyuki too had been on the verge of saying her real name, but Rin Kusakabe/Ash Roller didn't seem to pay this the slightest mind.

"Crow!" she shouted. "I'm so. Glad you're. Okay!"

"Ash, how did you...?"

"Oh. I'm also. A member. Of Nega Nebulus. So...," she said in her teary voice, and he remembered the truth of her words. She was a member.

Ash Roller, Bush Utan, and Olive Grab had obtained permission from the Green King to move from his Legion to Negabu on the condition that it was only until the fight with the Acceleration Research Society was settled.

"Sorry for worrying you, Ash. I'm totally fine, though. Just got my toes a little scorched by Inti," he said, slapping her shoulders, and finally Rin loosened her grip.

The instant he let out a sigh of relief, he noticed the glares of Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Niko, and he unconsciously sent his eyes racing around the area. He wanted her to return him to his seat, but Rin didn't move to set down his pig avatar. With no other choice, he moved his eyes even farther and caught sight of the exasperated faces of Cassis Moose, Thistle Porcupine, and Blood Leopard.

"H-hang on a sec. That cute pink girl is the person inside that wild rider?" Blaze asked, and Haruyuki hesitated over how exactly to answer.

The reason they were all calling one another by their avatar names at this meeting rather than their real names was because the three from the Prominence group hadn't met the members of the Nega Nebulus group in the real yet. In other words, they didn't know about the complicated relationship between Rin Kusakabe and Ash Roller, so it was only natural that they would be confused, but Haruyuki hesitated to explain the circumstances himself.



While he was *um*ing and *hm*ming, Rin turned to Cassis and the others and bowed.

“Yes, I am indeed Ash Roller. But strictly speaking, the one who fights in the Accelerated World. Isn’t me. Basically.”

“What? Meaning?” Blaze Heart looked even more doubtful.

“Right now, it’s like. Two personalities,” Rin explained simply. “Please think of it like that. Someday. I’ll explain properly.”

“That it? Okay, makes sense.” Blaze readily agreed, and Cassis and Thistle also nodded.

Now that he thought about it, there were more than a few Burst Linkers who dramatically changed character in BB from the real, so considering it in those terms, it wasn’t actually that hard to understand.

Blaze and the others also gave their names, and once the introductions were finished, Rin turned to her parent, Fuko.

“Um, Master. I’m sorry for. Being late.”

“It’s all right, Ash. How are things over at Great Wall?”

“I got a message. From Decurion,” Rin told her. “He said GW is. Putting priority on. Rescuing their king for the time being. They want to. Talk to Nebulus. Right away. About it.”

“I see. So that means GW is also postponing the general attack on Oscillatory. Given that, Blue and Purple likely have the same policy of prioritizing their masters’ rescue. I don’t know about Yellow, though. I get the feeling that Radio isn’t quite that popular,” Fuko remarked breezily and looked at Kuroyukihime. A quick nod was all they needed to communicate their intent to each other.

“Well then,” Fuko said, raising her voice to address the entire group. “We will reconfirm our policy going forward. There are three things we need to do. One: find the blacksmith shop. Two: construct a special-attack gauge recovery synergy. Three: speak with the four Great Legions. With regard to the first item—the search—we will need to take the utmost care given that we’ll have to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field. We’ll select a team for the task, so for the time being, I want you to inform all Legion members including the Prominence group that no one is to go off on their own looking for the blacksmith.”

“Roger that. We’ll be sure to let the Promi group know,” Cassis Moose assured her.

Fuko nodded before continuing. “I actually want you to do the opposite with the second item—recovery synergy. Wring every bit of information from every member. If anyone has any ideas about methods to recover special-attack gauges, please send them to me no matter how trivial they might seem, and I will collect them into a file

and distribute them. The ideal would be two different lines—no, actually I'd like to create three different lines.”

“Um, about that.” Still held by Rin, Haruyuki raised his hand.

Fuko smiled in her schoolteacher costume as she lifted her glasses. “Whaaat, Corvus?”

“Uh, I think everyone here knows about the existence of the system at least, so I'll go ahead and ask: Would it be a thing to go through Incarnate for this special-attack gauge recovery synergy?”

Instantly, the air around him grew tense, despite the fact that this was a virtual space, and Haruyuki shrank into himself, worried he'd messed up somehow.

The first to respond was Utai in her shrine maiden costume.

UI> I THINK THAT WE SHOULD USE WHATEVER MEANS ARE AT OUR DISPOSAL. IT'S NEGA NEBULUS'S RULE THAT INCARNATE POWER MUST BE USED ONLY WHEN WE ARE ATTACKED WITH INCARNATE, BUT BOTH ORCHID ORACLE'S PARADIGM BREAKDOWN, WHICH CHANGED THE VENUE OF THE MEETING OF THE SEVEN KINGS TO THE UNLIMITED NEUTRAL FIELD, AND BLACK VISE'S ICOSAHEDRAL INSULATION, WHICH LOCKED UP LO AND THE OTHERS, ARE INCARNATE TECHNIQUES. SO IN ORDER TO FIGHT THOSE, IT WOULDN'T BE BREAKING THAT RULE IF WE USED THE POWER OF INCARNATE.

After typing this long text in less than three seconds, Utai looked first at Haruyuki, then Fuko, and finally, Kuroyukihime.

“It is indeed as you say,” Kuroyukihime replied, half murmuring, and removed her hand from her parasol to stretch it out in front of her. “The power of Incarnate has generated any number of tragedies in the Accelerated World. No. I don't have the right to talk about it as if I'm somehow apart from that. Two years and eleven months ago, I myself killed the Red King Red Rider in a single blow with a special attack.”

Hearing this sudden monologue, Cassis Moose, Thistle Porcupine, and Blaze Heart jumped. The air grew even more tense, and Haruyuki couldn't breathe. Kuroyukihime continued speaking quietly, her hand still raised.

“I unconsciously enhanced that special attack with Incarnate. If I hadn't used Incarnate, then perhaps Rider could have escaped instant death. This inevitable imagining and regret has pulled me even further from the Incarnate System. I couldn't even guide the child I chose, Silver Crow, in the ways of Incarnate. However.”

She clenched her raised hand into a tight fist and continued to speak, as if pushing through pain, her voice making her strength even more powerfully felt.

“I've been thinking about it a lot lately. If the power of Incarnate was a simple system bug, then the Brain Burst admins would have dealt with it ages ago. The fact that they didn't suggests that the

presence of Incarnate techniques in the Accelerated World has some kind of meaning. I... I probably can't refine my Incarnate power any further. But I don't want new Burst Linkers to go down the same road I did. If the Incarnate ultimately leads to not only the deep darkness but also the light of hope, then I want them to find that someday."

Even after Kuroyukihime had slowly lowered her hand, no one spoke for a time.

Spurred on by the impulse that he had to say something, Haruyuki gritted his teeth. But his heart was too full, and no words would come out.

As if sensing his frustration, Rin squeezed him harder for a moment before speaking in an unusually certain voice. "My brother, Ash Roller, stubbornly refused to train in the Incarnate System even at Master Raker's urging. Because the power of Incarnate, drawing directly on the darkness of the heart, is in violation of his policy to simply enjoy the duel. But after going through the Territories yesterday, it seems like he's changed his stance on that a little."

"Do you mean because he personally experienced the threat of Oscillatory's Incarnate attack?" Kuroyukihime asked.

"No, that's not it." Rin shook her head firmly. "I can only remember the times when my brother is fighting hazily, like a dream, but even still, I remember this. Kuroyukihime's Starburst Stream that decided the fight at the end of the Territories—it's supposed to be a destructive Incarnate and yet it's a technique so beautiful that he almost cried. It shook my brother's heart."

"Whoa! Whoa there!" It was Niko butting in, of course. "I was busting my ass out there with my Incarnate technique at full power, too! Your bro didn't say anything about my Radiant Burst?!"

"Um... No, nothing..."

"That skull-faced jerk," Niko grumbled. "I'm *really* gonna make him cry the next time I see him."

Kuroyukihime smiled cheerfully at her for just an instant before she looked at Rin again. "If he thought that my Incarnate was beautiful... and if this leads to him studying the Incarnate, I can't be afraid forever myself... Crow."

Haruyuki straightened up in Rin's arms. "Y-yes!"

"About your earlier question. At the present stage, we can't eliminate the possibility of using the Incarnate System in this mission. However—and I believe you are also aware of this—with Incarnate techniques, light and dark are opposite sides of the same coin, and using them incites Enemies. So we must be very careful."

"Yes!" he shouted again.

The faint smile vanished from Kuroyukihime's face, and she added through slightly pursed lips, "And... how long are you going to keep

doing that?”

“Doing what?” He blinked in confusion before realizing that she was referring to the way he was being held. “No! Um! This is—!”

Panicking and stammering, he waved his arms, but Rin kept clutching him like his pig avatar was a stuffed animal. Unable to forcefully extricate himself, he simply twitched his ears as he cried, “You’ve got the wrong idea!”

“Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Hearing this cheerful laughter, Haruyuki looked to his left.

It was the young samurai avatar in his white mask. Realizing that the eyes of the entire group were now focused on him, he pressed a hand to his mask, but the laughter did not subside. In the end, he had to turn away from the group.

What exactly in this conversation tickled Lead like that? Haruyuki thought curiously.

An even greater wave of laughter than during his back-and-forth with Chiyuri rose up and washed over the back of the whale. He felt a slight shaking and looked up to find Rin was laughing out loud, too, mouth open wide. Takumu, Chiyuri, Fuko, Kuroyukihime, Niko, Pard, Akira, Utai, Rui, Shihoko and her friends, and even Cassis and the others were laughing a great deal, filling the air with their cheer.

Getting carried away, he broke into a chuckle himself, then thought in one corner of his mind that even the members of Oscillatory Universe—who were trying to bring about massive conflict in the Accelerated World—would have had times like this. Priceless moments, laughing together with comrades they were connected to by the heart... And yet. Why?

He was suddenly almost in tears, and he blinked repeatedly to push them back. A feeling that he himself couldn’t put into words filled his chest, and unable to say anything at all, Haruyuki simply continued to look deeply upon the faces of his comrades.

At any rate, even if we are attacked by the kings' Legions and no one is able to flee, no member would dream of leaving Oscillatory.

Haruyuki heard the echo of someone's faraway words in his mind the instant he returned to the real world. But whose were they, exactly? Ah, right—the first of the Seven Dwarves, the executive group for the White Legion, Platinum Cavalier.

Haruyuki and Fuko had encountered Cavalier in the sky above the battlefield immediately before he'd dropped Inti there using the Luminary, which had been entrusted to him by the White King. Fuko had warned him not to drag the rank-and-file members of Oscillatory into Black Vise's madness, but Cavalier had replied without seeming the slightest bit moved that not a single member of Oscillatory would leave. Was this because they were bound to the White King by the Judgment Blow or some similar fear? Or...

"Good work, Haruyuki."

He heard a voice in his ear and opened his eyes. An unfamiliar ceiling. The cushion wrapped around his back. And a soft warmth touching his arm.

Finally remembering the situation into which he had dived, Haruyuki bounced up and tried to get out of the massive beanbag chair. But before he could, a slender arm snaked out from his right and held him back.

"Ah! K-K-K-Kuroyukihime, what..." His half screech died out the instant he saw her slight pout. He wondered if he'd messed up yet again.

"You were fine when Rin Kusakabe was holding you, so why the overreaction when it's me?" she asked.

"Huh?" It took him two seconds to understand the meaning of the question, and then he was even more stunned. "N-n-n-no! That was two avatars! B-but this, it's you and me, um, like, our, uh real selves!"

"Our avatars are also parts of our real selves," she noted. "It's only the amount of information they're made of that's not the same. There's essentially no real difference."

Maaaaaybeeeee?

In his mind, he raised his eyebrows almost off his forehead, but before he could voice any objection, Kuroyukihime leaned her whole body against him, and his thoughts stopped once more. She weighed a good deal less than the average ninth-grade girl, but even so, his body sank deeply into the beanbag, rendering him unable to move. Now she was forced to look up at him, and she smiled playfully.

“Let me just stay like this for a bit. When we’re touching each other, there’s this synergistic effect that recovers my mental exhaustion.”

He was about to say that was ridiculous, but stopped himself just in time. Instead, he asked in a hushed tone, “Um, I feel like the meeting was pretty hopeful... Was that not enough to replenish you?”

Kuroyukihime blinked twice before shaking her head. “Ah, my apologies. I gave you the wrong impression. I did feel hopeful. The biggest hurdle is finding the blacksmith, but it’s not as though I don’t have a few ideas on the subject. But everyone doing whatever they can to rescue me... it’s hard for me. I can hardly stand it, it’s so frustrating,” she told him in a hushed voice and pressed firmly against his chest.



After hesitating for a second, he lifted his hands and gently wrapped his arms around her slender body. For once, the words came up from somewhere deep inside him, without him having to desperately reach for them.

“Just because you’re the Legion Master doesn’t mean you have to carry everything around all by yourself.”

Her shoulders suddenly shot up in surprise. Slowly patting them, he told her what was in his heart, one careful word after the other:

“Ever since you reformed Nega Nebulus, you’ve always tried to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the Legion members. When we fought the fifth Chrome Disaster, when we rescued Shinomiya from Suzaku’s altar, when I turned into the sixth Chrome Disaster, when we dealt with the ISS kits, and even in the Territories yesterday or at the meeting of the Seven Kings today... And not just that. When Araya charged us with that car, you used the ultimate command, spending ninety-nine percent of your Burst Points, and were so seriously injured, your life was on the line, just to save me.”

“Well, that was only natural,” she murmured in a hoarse voice, face still pressed to his chest. “I’m your Legion Master and... your parent.”

But he shook his head firmly. “It wasn’t ‘only natural.’ It absolutely wasn’t only natural.”

He moved his hands from her shoulders to her back.

“You’re superstrong,” he continued. “So at some point, it just started to seem natural for me to rely on you. I’m always thinking everything’ll be fine as long as you’re with me. I didn’t realize I was basically making you carry this heavy burden constantly.”

“You’re one of the Seven Kings. You’re a level niner. You’re stronger than anyone. But the truth is, you’re just a year older than me, and in junior high just like me. I... I’m still totally weak, and all I do is get lost and struggle in both the Accelerated World and the real world, but I want to get stronger so that you can rely on me more. So that I’m not always being supported, so we can support each other, help each other, I want to move forward together toward the same objective.”

“I’m sure all the other Legion members are the same right now. Not just the Nega Nebulus group, but the members of the Prominence group, even though they only just merged with us. I just know it. So this time, lean on us. Please believe in us. We *will* rescue you, and the other four kings, from Inti’s Unlimited EK. So... So...”

This was perhaps the first time in his fourteen years and change of life that Haruyuki had been able to utter such a long statement without stuttering. But at the end, his heart was full to bursting, and

no matter how deeply he breathed, he could not put it all into words. Eyes damp with tears that had sprung up at some point, he breathed raggedly.

Kuroyukihime lifted her face and looked at him from that close vantage point. Her obsidian eyes also looked a little damp. "You've gotten stronger, hmm, Haruyuki?"

She moved a hand to touch his cheek.

"You've gotten very strong in both the Accelerated World and the real world. You're not simply being supported here... You've been holding us up for a long time now: me, Fuko, Utai, Akira, Niko, and the others. We've managed to make it this far because you spread your silver wings and continue to soar high in the sky for all of us."

When Kuroyukihime shifted, her face was suddenly directly above his own. He looked at her lips, lustrous like pearls, trembling a mere ten centimeters away from him. She moved closer. Her black hair was a flowing stream, and he could smell a distinct sweetness. The pounding of his heart accelerated.

Beep-beep-beep!

Suddenly, an electronic noise rang out in the living room, putting an end to the magical moment. Kuroyukihime jerked her face up and touched her virtual desktop.

"Sorry," she said. "I have it set for this time every day for the bath."

"Oh... Y-yeah?"

"Mmm. Yes... Haruyuki, you get in, too."

"Huh?" Here, his choice of words was decisively mistaken. He should have first asked if he shouldn't maybe go home. But he was caught off guard by the unanticipated proposal, and he ended up saying the first thing that came to mind.

"Uh... Um, do I stink or something?"

"Hmm?" She raised an eyebrow. "No, that's not what I meant. But you've been running around since noon. You must be tired."

She stood up and then offered him a hand. He accepted this and got to his feet, but he wasn't any more certain of what he should do.

"Um, but I can't use the bath before the head of the house," he protested.

"Oh, don't be like that. You're the guest, you know," she replied. "No need to make a fuss. Go and wash that sweat away."

"S-so I *do* smell," Haruyuki muttered, and Kuroyukihime pushed his back with both hands to deliver him to the washroom/changing room in the middle of the hallway.

"Use all the shampoo and body soap you want. Take your time."

The sliding door was closed, and he stood there dumbfounded for a minute or two. He wondered vaguely how it had come to this, but

his brain wasn't working. At the very least, however, it was clear that he couldn't just say he was heading home now. On top of that, he couldn't help but feel like he really *did* need to wash away the sweat and grime.

Mechanically, he got out of his school uniform and folded it neatly in the clothing basket provided before opening the folding glass door and stepping into the bathroom.

It was about the same size as the bathroom in the Arita house, but the bathtub itself was the latest model, complete with jet nozzles. Naturally, however, he couldn't simply jump into the bath. He sat down on a transparent stool, took the Neurolinker off his neck, and hung it on a hook on the wall for that purpose before showering himself in hot water. After diligently cleaning his entire body so that not a speck of dirt remained, he sank into the tub. The water wasn't too hot, just how he liked it, and a sigh escaped his lips as his entire body relaxed; exhaustion he hadn't even been aware of evaporated from his limbs as he gradually loosened up.

He retrieved his Neurolinker from the hook on the wall and put it back on so he could connect with the bathroom control panel. In the menu that was displayed, he turned the jet nozzles on, and a stream of tiny bubbles hit his back.

"Hyaah!" he cried out. It was a strange sensation, almost painful, yet also ticklish, and once he had a moment to get used to it, definitely not unpleasant. In fact, it felt pretty good.

As he dreamed about how nice it would be for the Arita bathtub to have such a nifty feature, too, he gave himself over to the bubbles, and his thoughts drifted in new directions.

His parents had bought their condo fourteen years earlier, the year he was born. It was the kind of building that allowed fairly free customization of the interior and the facilities, so he was sure his mother and father had debated one feature or another while peering at the catalog together to decide on the specifications one room at a time. Maybe they had even gone back and forth over whether or not to have jet nozzles in the bathtub.

They had divorced when he was in second grade. When his father finally moved out, Haruyuki hadn't been able to hold back his tears and had clutched at the man's legs, pleading with him not to go. But after letting him cry for a while, his father had peeled Haruyuki's arms away with his large hands and gripped his shoulders tightly just once before stepping out the front door without a word. Haruyuki never saw him again, not even once. He didn't even know where his father was or what he was doing now.

The reason for the divorce had apparently been his father's infidelity. So it was possible that he had built a new family with the

other woman in some other town. Maybe they even had children. At the age of fourteen, he no longer wanted to see his father, and remembering him didn't make him particularly sad anymore. Even so, Haruyuki continued to use the bed and mesh office chair his father had left in his own room and had no intention of replacing them, even if they were a little worn out.

He closed the bath control panel and opened the storage of his Neurolinker. Digging into his folder structure, which had gotten quite complicated and multilayered from long years of use, he finally reached a folder by the name of "F."

The *F* was for "father." Inside, he had archived the pictures and videos, mails, work-related folders, and more from his father that he had secretly copied from the home server before his mother erased them all. When he was in elementary school, he would sometimes access this folder with a blanket over his head and repeatedly play the very few videos of his father alone or of the three of them as a family. But at some point, he'd stopped doing that, and the last time he'd accessed the folder was... in the middle of the Dusk Taker incident when he'd pulled out materials for his full-dive technical history.

That time, his father's data had helped him. If he hadn't had the annotated text his father had written in one place in the chronological table, Haruyuki wouldn't have found out about the brain implant chip that was Dusk Taker and the Acceleration Research Society's secret. He didn't particularly want to see the man, but if he happened to glimpse him from afar one day, he wanted to offer his silent gratitude. *Thanks to you, I'm still a Burst Linker.*

"Hey, if you stay in there too long, you're going to get dizzy from the heat."

Haruyuki hurriedly closed the window as he replied, "Oh! I'm sorry. I'll be out in a min—"

There, his whole body froze, he turned his head awkwardly to the left, and his thoughts stopped again for about three seconds before he shouted, "Whadeerookiheem!"

He had intended to say "What are you doing in here, Kuroyukihime?" and hadn't gotten anywhere close to that. But he didn't even have the presence of mind to notice this; he simply flapped his mouth open and shut.

At some point, the glass door had opened, and Kuroyukihime had taken a step into the bathroom. She came to look because she was worried about him—no, that was apparently not it. He was able to throw that possibility out because her long hair was held up with a clip, and she was only wearing a white bath towel wrapped around her body.

"Um! S-s-s-s-s-sorry! I-I-I-I-I'll get out right away!"

This time, he managed to shout in actual words and started to stand before freezing for the third time. Naturally, Haruyuki didn't have anything to cover himself with, so the process of getting out of the bath and moving to the changing room presented a massive problem.

"Uh! Um, K-K-Kuroyukihime, c-c-c-could you wait outside until I-I get—"

"Oh, it's fine, though. I mean, once in a while," she responded easily, and stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She cut in front of the dumbfounded Haruyuki, and dropped down onto the bath stool.

"... O-once in a while... I-I've never..." He squeezed a voice out from his throat as it threatened to close over, and Kuroyukihime glared at the mirror in front of her.

"That's it right there," she said, her voice slightly thorny. "That's the problem."

"P-problem?"

"It's obvious. I can't exactly *not* do what Niko did."

"Huh? Wh-what did Niko...?" And then he finally remembered.

The first time she'd met Haruyuki, Niko aka Yuniko Kozuki had identified herself under the alias of Tomoko Saito, the name of Haruyuki's actual second cousin on his mother's side. Niko passed herself off as Tomoko, got into the Arita house, and had even jumped into the bath area where Haruyuki had been bathing—although it was the first time they'd met—an all-out social engineering plot.

"O-oh, it's true that *did* happen, but that was so Niko could get some dirt on me and poach me to Prominence... Wait. Did I ever actually tell you about Niko's bath attack?" Haruyuki cocked his head curiously to one side, hands gripping the edges of the tub.

Kuroyukihime kept her back turned to him. "I didn't hear about it from you; Niko herself told me about the time the two of us took a bath at your place."

"... R-right..."

"I've been thinking about it ever since. That if I ever got the chance, I would collect on that debt."

"D-debt?" he asked. "From Niko? Or me?"

"Both. Now then... Since I'm here, will you wash my back for me?"

"Ooeee?!"

This time for sure, Haruyuki was going to say the words—*I can't I'm sorry I'll get out now*—but while they were stuck in a traffic jam in his mouth, Kuroyukihime grabbed the bath towel wrapped around her body with one hand. She seemed to hesitate for a mere instant, but before Haruyuki could say anything, she undid the towel and pulled it

away from her body, and then balled it up and held it in both hands.

Even in the slightly orange light, Kuroyukihime's back was as pale as snow, slender like a sprite's, and Haruyuki couldn't even blink. His thoughts ground to a complete halt, and all he could do was stare, mouth agape.

A few seconds later, Kuroyukihime rounded her back a little and sneezed.

This finally undid his petrification. "K-Kuroyukihime, you're going to catch a cold," he told her, hoarsely.

"Then you'd better hurry up. Master's orders."

"Uh, um, uhhh... Okay..."

If she was going to go so far as to order him, then he had no choice other than to obey. Haruyuki finally got to his feet, straddled the edge of the bathtub, and stepped into the washing area. Hiding the front of his body, he inched forward and dropped to his knees when he was about twenty centimeters away from her back.

Was this real life? He thought he'd linked out after the meeting ended, but maybe his Neurolinker had been submerged and forced the full dive to continue. With such thoughts in his head, he pinched his thigh, but the current situation did not change.

Firming up his resolve, he stretched his arm out as far as it would go and took the showerhead out of the holder on the wall. After turning the dial to get hot water to come out and checking the temperature, he timidly brought the stream of water to the back in front of him. Countless droplets bounced off the fair skin and glittered in the glow from the panel lights in the ceiling.

As he innocently let the water flow, he heard a voice of complaint.

"Haruyuki, I'd appreciate it if you would wash my back before I turn into a prune."

"Oh... R-right!" he half said, half shrieked, and turned off the water before picking up the bath sponge with his other hand and foaming it up with soap. He took the sponge in both hands and carefully, ever so carefully, rubbed it against Kuroyukihime's back.

"Hyaah," she squealed. "Y-you can do it harder, you know. That tickles."

He hurried to put more force into the movement. "I-is this okay?"

"Mmm. Perfect."

Breathing a sigh of relief, he sent the sponge back and forth from right below her black Neurolinker to the top of her hip bone, paying the greatest of care to the job.

"Mmm." Letting out a purr, Kuroyukihime continued, "This is the first time anyone's ever washed my back. It does actually feel good."

"Huh?" He was surprised. "Didn't Niko do this?"

"Hee-hee! Back then, we weren't as open with each other yet."

“I—I guess. But what about your mom or your dad—?” Haruyuki quickly clamped his mouth shut. She had already told him she wasn’t close with her parents. He regretted saying anything, but, well, he couldn’t take it back.

“Perhaps when I was a baby,” she said gently, but also a little sadly when he stiffened up and stopped near her shoulder blades. “But as far back as I can remember, I never took a bath with my mother or my father. I did bathe with my sister until I was eight, but on the day I became her Brain Burst child—a Burst Linker—she told me that from then on, I would have to bathe by myself.”

“... She... did?” Haruyuki started to move the sponge again. But then Kuroyukihime said something unexpected.

“Haruyuki, could you take off my Neurolinker?”

“Huh? ...S-sure.” He returned the sponge to the counter before timidly raising his hands and grabbing the piano-black quantum transmission device on the impossibly slender neck with his fingertips.

The act of removing another person’s Neurolinker was the biggest taboo in modern society; it was a serious offense if you didn’t have the person’s consent. Even if it was done as a child’s prank, it would result in a harsh scolding. Heart pounding, he pushed the arms out to either side and slowly pulled it off her neck.

“... I-it’s off.” He offered it to her and she accepted it with a “thanks” before hanging it on the wall hook.

He figured that she was basically telling him to wash her neck, but what she said next was even more unexpected.

“Look very closely at the part of my neck that was under the Neurolinker arm. Is there... anything there?”

“Huh? ...Like what?” Blinking in surprise, Haruyuki pulled his face in close to her neck. The straggling hairs plastered bewitchingly to her skin almost blinded him, but he mustered up his willpower and stared at the space between her third and fourth vertebrae—at the strip of skin that was even more devoid of color than the rest of her pale neck.

“Oh... Oh?!” Haruyuki let out a cry, his surprise was so great.

Something like a pale-purple pattern rose up ever so faintly on her snowy skin. No. It wasn’t just a random pattern. It was a bar code. And numbers.

“K-Kuroyukihime...”

“You see it? Eight numbers and a bar code?”

“Yes... What is it?”

Unconsciously, he raised a hand and rubbed the bar code with a finger. But the row of slender lines did not disappear. It didn’t seem to be drawn in ink or anything like that.

“Mmm...” Kuroyukihime twitched, so Haruyuki yanked his hand

away as if it were on fire.

"I—I'm sorry! I—I just..."

"No, it's fine," she told him. "But listen. It's not some kind of fashionable tattoo, all right? This was printed on me when I was born. I was told it would disappear when I'm an adult. But it seems that it's still there..."

"This was printed on you when you were born?" Unable to understand the meaning of these words, Haruyuki simply parroted them back. "You were told... by whom?"

"Mmm. Before that, do you mind if I wash my hair? Thanks for getting my back. Go and warm up in the tub."

Thus instructed, he nodded and returned to the bath. Even though the water couldn't have cooled off already, he didn't feel its warmth even submerged up to his shoulders. The shock of finding the bar code and digits on that pale neck had chilled his limbs to the point of numbness.

While he watched, Kuroyukihime removed the clip from her head and let her hair fall free. After wetting it, she foamed up shampoo in her hands and then massaged it into her hair.

Normally, Haruyuki would never have been able to directly witness her doing something like this; he would have turned around or submerged himself beneath the water. But for whatever reason, he was unable to take his eyes off her for even a second now.

Having finished shampooing, Kuroyukihime carefully rinsed the lather out of her hair, turned off the water, and then massaged in conditioner. She combed this through neatly with a brush and rinsed for the third time. She gathered it all up again and pinned it in place with the clip. Then she sighed before scrubbing her body with the loofah.

The whole time, Haruyuki felt like she was a fairy or even a goddess. But of course, she was neither. Kuroyukihime, after all, was a flesh-and-blood human being. Just like Haruyuki, she ate every day and took showers. A regular girl in just about every respect.

But then what was that bar code about?

Rinsing off the lather, she rose from the stool and looked back. When her eyes met Haruyuki's, a slightly challenging smile spread across her lips, and she raised a hand and flicked the drops of water on her fingertips at him. He reflexively looked away, and she slid into the hot water of the tub, leaned back against the opposite end, stretched out her long legs, and let out a deep sigh.

"Um. Th-that's a lot of work, huh?" The water was a cloudy white thanks to the jet nozzles, but even so, Haruyuki took care not to turn his gaze that way as he spoke.

He got an exasperated voice in return. "You do the same thing

every day, though.”

“B-but... I just basically scrub my head and I’m done. It’s rough being a girl, huh?”

“Hmm. You’ve learned something.” Smiling once again, Kuroyukihime touched the wall with her left hand. Part of the plastic panel slid away without a sound, and a small compartment appeared. Inside there was a single glass, and a transparent liquid poured into it from a nozzle above.

“Here.” She offered him the glass, the sides of which instantly clouded over. “It’s just water, though.”

“Th-thank you... I’d love some.” He accepted it with both hands and brought it to his lips. The nicely chilled water was so good it was almost intoxicating. Maybe because he was a little dehydrated, he drank the whole glass down in a single gulp before exhaling deeply and returning it to her.

Kuroyukihime filled it again and took a sip or two herself before returning the glass to the compartment. The panel closed as if it had never been there, and the sound of cleaning reached his ears.

“You like the bath?”

“Um.” Haruyuki thought a minute about the sudden question before answering. “About as much as anyone, I guess. I don’t hate it or anything, but sometimes, I do think it’s kind of a hassle.”

“Ha-ha! I suppose boys your age do,” she said. “I actually feel the same.”

“H-huh? The features on this bath are amazing, though. So I just sort of assumed you love them.”

“I don’t hate them. But sitting in the water like this always forces me to recognize the limitations of my real body. The essential nature of a human being is a single tube—the alimentary canal, basically. Limbs, sensory organs, even the brain, they’re nothing more than parts for the efficient operation of that tube,” she told him. “I end up thinking about things like this. Sometimes, I wish I could turn myself inside out and clean every part of me.”

Haruyuki didn’t know how to respond to these words, which seemed strangely desperate for Kuroyukihime. He wanted to tell her she was beautiful, but she wasn’t talking about her physical appearance. He understood that much at least.

He must have been making an especially pathetic face, because she looked at him and clapped her hands on the water surface.

“Sorry for being weird. The essential nature of human beings is a tube... My older sister told me that when I was little. Honestly. How many years has it been and I’m still stuck on a joke like that. It’s like she cast a spell on me.”

“But I think it’s good that people evolved from creatures with a

mouth and an alimentary canal,” Haruyuki replied unthinkingly, and Kuroyukihime raised her eyebrows slightly.

“Oh? And why’s that?”

“I mean, if we were creatures that absorbed nutrients with our entire bodies, we never would’ve developed cooking and stuff,” he said. “In which case, the Nega Nebulus dinner parties would just be, like, everyone getting into a nutrient pool or something.”

“Pfft!” Kuroyukihime burst out laughing. “I can’t beat your imagination. True, spare us that at least. If I’m going to eat, I want it to at least be delicious. Like those squash croquettes and the sandwich I won off you.”

“R-right.”

“Mmm. And lately, I’ve been thinking that my sister’s words might also have a different meaning.”

“A different meaning?” Now it was Haruyuki’s turn to tilt his head to one side.

Kuroyukihime lowered her eyelashes and fell silent for a few seconds, but then finally asked him a question, half murmured. “Haruyuki, do you know the basic theory behind the Neurolinker?”

This was a big leap from the previous topic of conversation, and it took him a few seconds to switch mental gears.

“The basic theory? You mean, the quantum connection... right?” he answered, timidly. “It connects with the user’s brain wirelessly on the quantum level and inputs and outputs sensory information.”

“Mmm,” she agreed. “It’s not generally known, but at the development stage, that quantum connection technology was apparently called ‘soul translation technology.’”

“S-soul trans... lation?” The words were just barely in Haruyuki’s English lexicon. “You mean like translating the human spirit?”

“Exactly.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “‘STLT’ for short. In other words, the Neurolinker is communicating not with human brain cells, but more precisely, the spirit.”

“Th-the spirit... Does that even actually exist?”

“The developers of the STLT believed it does. I only have the roughest knowledge of this myself, but in every cell in the human body, there are these ‘microtubules’—microscopic tube-shaped structures, just like the name suggests, and they’re apparently connected with the shape, maintenance, and movement of cells. Of course, these microtubules are also in the neurons in the brain. They have coherent light particles inside of them. The decoherence brought about by those photons is itself human consciousness, the soul.”

Haruyuki could only understand a tenth of what she was saying. But the concept of light cohering in the brain easily created an image for some reason, and he stared into space in a daze. He suddenly felt

like this image was connected to something, and he gasped. But before that something could take shape, Kuroyukihime went on.

“Sorry. I got a little off track. At any rate, the ‘tubule’ of the ‘microtubules’ in these cells means a ‘tiny tube’ in English.”

“A tube,” Haruyuki repeated.

“Yes. And given that, perhaps when my sister said the essential nature of human beings is a tube, she didn’t mean the alimentary canal, but rather the microtubules in the brain. Although that doesn’t change my estimation of that girl.”

“Oh... Maybe,” he muttered, and then was at a loss for what to say next. But urged on by her eyes, he resolved himself and asked, “Was it maybe your sister who told you the bar code on your neck would disappear when you grew up?”

“Oh! How sharp of you. You’re exactly right.” Kuroyukihime smiled and brought a hand up with a *splsh* to touch the nape of her neck. “I suppose if I’ve told you this much... I might as well tell you everything.”

She lowered her hand before looking straight at him on the opposite side of the tub. He’d been trying not to look right at her this whole time, but sensing that he could not avoid her gaze in this moment at least, Haruyuki stared back into her ebony eyes.

“The first generation of personal-use Neurolinkers came on the market in April 2031... Two years before you were born and one year before I was.”

Kuroyukihime glanced over at her device, still hanging on the hook on the opposite wall.

“Two companies developed the first generation—the largest general electrical manufacturer Lect and the mid-sized net device manufacturer Kamura. I don’t know myself why the STL technology that forms the basis of the Neurolinker found practical application at two companies at the same time. But while Lect stopped at using the STL in its Neurolinkers, Kamura was more ambitious. Using a super technology to decode the human soul, they tried to reach into the domain of the gods.”

“‘Domain... of the gods?’” he repeated.

“Haruyuki, if you could read and write all of the information comprising the human soul, don’t you think you would be able to realize something more than an interface with that technology?”

“More than an interface... Um, so you mean...” While his brain had every gear whirring toward decoding this excessively difficult topic, a single word fell from his lips. “Duplication?”

His own imaginings sent a shiver of fear up his spine, but he didn’t try to stop his mouth.

“If a person’s brain is a medium... then you could load someone’s

soul and post it to someone else's brain?"

"Yes, that's it exactly." Kuroyukihime also looked pale somehow, although she was soaking in hot water. "If it were possible to duplicate the soul... But to actually carry that out would be equivalent to murder. The mind of the person it was copied to would be overwritten and destroyed. And it seems that not even Kamura could go that far. But by even producing the copy medium, they tried to smash through that wall."

"Medium... So you mean a mechanical memory device that could save the soul in place of the real brain?" Haruyuki said, convinced that that was the only possibility.

But Kuroyukihime shook her head slowly. "No. Kamura created a person. The technological hurdles were likely not that high. They were already making practical use of artificial wombs in 2030."

"B-but even if there was the artificial womb, you can't make a person from nothing," he protested. "We learned that in biology."

"You're quite right. But as long as you have a man to supply the sperm and a woman to supply the egg, you can raise an embryo fertilized outside the body in an artificial womb. Even at present, this is done as a matter of course as a treatment for infertility."

"I—I guess it is," Haruyuki agreed quietly, only to shake his head quickly back and forth. "But I mean, overwriting the brain of a baby born like that with someone else's soul... No one would allow that, right? The original baby's soul would disappear!"

"Mm-hmm. But Kamura—no, my parents—did it anyway."

A violent tremor ran through his body before his brain could process what she was saying. Clenching both hands tightly in the hot water, he muttered hoarsely, "Y-your... parents...? What...?"

"In kanji, Kamura is written 'kami' and 'mura,' or 'village of the gods.' My mother's family name. My mother was the daughter of the Kamura Company owner, and my father was a researcher there. Even after they got married, they both remained involved in STL technology research, and they ended up getting their hands dirty with a prohibited experiment. Duplication of the human soul..."

Haruyuki's eyes shot open wide, and his vision wavered with a purple afterimage. A small bar code and numbers inscribed on pale skin.

"Kuroyukihime... Kuroyukihime." Muttering almost incoherently, Haruyuki moved toward her in the tub. But her toes gently pushed against his knee and stopped his forward progress.

"I know now. I wasn't born from my mother's stomach. I was an embryo raised in an artificial womb after being fertilized outside the body—a so-called machine child. The term's discriminatory, so you're not supposed to use it, but there's no issue with the child in question

using it.”

She chuckled bitterly and lifted her hands out of the water. Staring at her palms like they were unfamiliar creatures, she continued her shocking confession.

“But although I might be a machine child, there’s no doubt that genetically, I am my parents’ daughter. I was equipped with a Neurolinker while I was still in the artificial womb and soul duplication measures were implemented. The bar code on my neck is a vestige of that. Meaning that on the soul level, I have no connection with my parents whatsoever.”

“So... So then,” Haruyuki said in a voice so faint he himself almost couldn’t hear it. “So then your soul, your mother and your father...? It has to be somewhere, doesn’t it? Your real soul...” He gasped. “Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that your parents aren’t your real parents.”

“No, it’s fine,” she told him. “I’ve basically never felt any familial love from the parents of the Shirokane family. I’m grateful that they’ve allowed me to live without any kind of physical want, at least, but for them, I’m, at most, just an experiment. They only yelled at me not to be so fussy because the menu had been calculated to specific nutritional requirements.”

Kuroyukihime returned one hand to the water. She turned her other around in the air and tapped the water surface with her fingertips like she was playing the piano, generating several small ripples that spread out and disappeared.

“I don’t know where the soul my brain was overwritten with came from. But I think most likely, it wasn’t that of an adult or a child, but of a baby. There wouldn’t be enough capacity in an infant brain to write all the information of an adult soul.”

“A baby’s... soul?”

“This is all nothing more than supposition. For instance, they tried to transplant into me the soul of a baby that died soon after it was born. Or some such.”

“Um, did you never ask your parents about this?”

Kuroyukihime shook her head gently. “The Shirokane parents... Most likely, they don’t know that I know the secret of my birth. I dug up all of this information on my own after I was given the SSS Order.”

“Tr-triple?”

“Oh, you don’t know about that?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’ll explain it later, but for now let me continue. I snuck into the main system at Kamura headquarters and tried to get as much information as I could about the experiment fifteen years ago. But almost all the data had been deleted. I pieced together whatever information I could dredge up in the corners of the server and managed to get a grasp of

the general overview. But it's full of holes, and the final objective of the experiment is still unclear. I can't even begin to guess at where my soul came from. My sister was the only one I turned to in search of the truth, but all she told me was what I said before about the mark disappearing when I'm grown up."

"That's it, huh?" Haruyuki hung his head.

Kuroyukihime patted his knee, still up against her leg. "No need for you to lose heart," she assured him. "It's not as though I don't have hope myself. It might be meager, but I do have a clue."

"A clue?" He lifted his face to look at her.

"Mmm. You saw them, yes? The eight digits inscribed next to the bar code on my neck."

"Yes. 20320930... right?"

"Do you know what they mean?"

He gaped at her and was about to ask what she meant when it finally hit him. This sequence could have been nothing other than a date. So then it would have been September 30.

"Oh... I-is that your birthday?"

"I wanted you to get that about three seconds faster." Kuroyukihime pouted a little, so Haruyuki shrank into himself.

"Sorry," he said. "But how is your birthday a clue?"

"According to the records, I was in the artificial womb for thirteen months. Despite the fact that there were no developmental failures... And I also don't understand the intent in going to the trouble of inscribing my birthday on me. In other words, this date must have some special meaning. For some reason, they chose September thirtieth to remove me from the tank."

"September thirtieth," Haruyuki muttered. "Is that a bank holiday or something?"

"Apparently, it's Walnut Day," she answered with a serious face. "Also, Crane Day."

"W-walnut... Crane... Neither seem like they'd be connected..."

"Not really." She nodded and then giggled. "But I'm sure to come across this date sometime, somewhere. And then I'll understand the history of the soul written into me. I just have a feeling..."

Her smile was innocent, and thus it seemed so ephemeral that it might fade and disappear at any moment. Unconsciously, Haruyuki gently removed his knee from the leg it was pressing against and moved another twenty centimeters forward to clasp her hand tightly in both of his own.

"Kuroyukihime, you might have been raised in an artificial womb, you might have been part of an STLT experiment... but that was before you were born. From the time you were born until this moment, you've eaten meals, slept like a log, studied hard, exercised a

lot, cried and laughed a whole bunch, and created your own self—that's who you are. Me and Master Fuko, Shinomiya, Akira, Taku, Chiyu, Niko, Pard... What so many people love is the Kuroyukihime of right now," he told her earnestly.

She didn't say anything for a while, just cocked her head slightly to one side. Suddenly, her wide, obsidian eyes blinked repeatedly. A sharp light glinted there—the steam of the bath or sweat or...

Hand still in his, Kuroyukihime leaned forward and wrapped her arm around Haruyuki's neck to yank him closer. In the hot water, skin against skin, he no longer knew where the boundary between them was.

"... Thanks," came a faint voice in his ear. "I'm okay... Because you're always here to anchor me like this."

"... Right." That was all he could say in reply, but he felt his feelings had been conveyed well enough. He closed his eyes and desperately tried to keep whatever threatened to spill out contained behind his eyelids.



While they were bathing, Kuroyukihime had put the things Haruyuki was wearing in the laundry. Which meant that she had touched his underpants, which gave him a start. But she simply replied, mysteriously, “This’ll make things tough in the future.”

They had both been in the bath for too long, and the blood was rushing to their heads, so they cooled down for a bit, drinking chilled barley tea, and the clock showed 10:30 PM. But he couldn’t let the message to his mother be a lie, so rubbing sleepy eyes, he tackled his summer homework. Although he made better progress than he’d expected since Kuroyukihime was there next to him, offering advice, he finally reached his work limit at 11:45.

Haruyuki had been thinking he would get Kuroyukihime to sleep tucked away in her bed, with the beanbag chair in the living room being plenty for him. But she brought out blankets from the neighboring room and laid him down on the chair before setting herself down beside him like it was the most natural thing in the world. He assumed there was no way he’d be able to sleep like that, but that turned out to be his last thought of July 21. The Sandman visited him before he knew it, and tucked up against Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki was swallowed up by a gentle darkness.

The next day, Monday, July 22, 2047—7:00 AM on the second day of summer break—Haruyuki woke up to the sound of mail arriving.

However, with only about 10 percent of his brain turned on, Haruyuki simply blinked several times before quickly squeezing his eyes shut again. His back was wrapped in a mysterious elasticity, and the right half of his body was pressed up against something soft and warm. It was an altogether good feeling that had no comparison. He wanted to sleep just another hour—no, two hours like this...

“Unnnnh...” Together with this hoarse voice, someone’s breath tickled his right ear, and Haruyuki opened his eyes once more.

As soon as he saw the unfamiliar ceiling and the curtains that were the wrong color, he remembered that this was not his own room in the Arita household, but rather Kuroyukihime’s house in Minami-Asagaya. When he slowly turned his head to the side, Kuroyukihime had her face resting on his shoulder, perfectly innocent in sleep.

His heart pounded hard once, but he didn’t roll off the cushion, shouting. Instead, an almost sad fondness and a determination to protect her filled his heart.

He operated his virtual desktop with his left hand so that he wouldn’t wake her and opened the message that had just arrived. The sender was “RM.” Wondering whose initials they could be, Haruyuki opened the message and gasped. Now he was completely awake and devoured the short text.

I GOT YOUR MESSAGE. THERE’S SOMETHING I’D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT, TOO. RM

RM... Rose Milady. There was no mistake. The Saint Amaterasu had kept her promise to Haruyuki and given Rose his message. He wanted to reply right away, but before that...

“Um, Kuroyukihime?” Haruyuki reached out and gently shook the shoulder of the slumbering girl. “I’m sorry to bug you when you’re sleeping... But I got a message from Rose.”

Instantly, the long-lashed eyelids snapped open—so forcefully that he could almost hear the sound they made.

After finishing a simple breakfast of hot tea and yesterday’s lemon

start, Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime left the house at 9:00 AM.

It was slightly overcast and temperate. According to the forecast, this weather was supposed to continue for the rest of the day, and there was no concern about rain. Kuroyukihime, in her school uniform to match Haruyuki, glanced up at the sky before smiling at him.

"It doesn't look like it will be as hot as yesterday, thank goodness."

"Yeah," he agreed. "How are we going to get to Sasazuka?"

"Mmm." She thought for a moment. "Moving north to south is quite the hassle in Suginami. We could take the Metro to Shinjuku and then switch to the Keio Line, or take a bus to Kannana. At times like this, I'm jealous of Niko and Fuko, who have their own means of getting around."

"The motorcycle's Dad's, and the car is also Master's mother's, isn't—"

"Then I will get my license next year and you get a motorcycle," she declared.

"I—I don't have a license, though!"

"Oh-ho? You didn't know? You don't need a driver's license to own a car or a motorcycle," Kuroyukihime told him, grinning, before sending her fingertip racing through the air. "It's a bit decadent for junior high students, but let's take a taxi. My treat, of course."

"Huh... Th-thanks..."

"Think of it as a thank-you for the provisions you brought last night."

While they were speaking, he heard the quiet hum of a motor as a super-compact EV pulled up on the road in front of the town house. A driverless two-seater taxi.

When Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime got in and fastened their seat belts, the taxi quietly pulled out. The route and expected arrival time were displayed in the holo display/front windshield. Haruyuki was sitting in the driver's side seat, but the vehicle was completely automatic, so there was no steering wheel or any pedals in front of him. Given that he had played through more than his fair share of racing games, his hands and feet itched to do something, but this was no time to be distracted by this sort of static.

"I wonder why Rose specified this side of Sasazuka." With no driver, he was free to ask the question.

"Hmm." Kuroyukihime folded her arms across her chest. "Generally, it would mean she intends to use a normal duel stage to contact us. But in that case, it would be enough to say 'Shibuya Area One.' No need to indicate the neighborhood specifically. Well, we'll find out when we get there. Shibuya One is currently Nega Nebulus territory, so you and I have the right to refuse challenges. It won't be a

trap.”

“I guess not,” he said. “And speaking of territory, we’ll have to defend Shibuya One and Two, plus Minato Three, in the Territories this weekend?”

“Mmm,” the Legion Master murmured. “Shibs One and Two were yielded to us by Great Wall, but it seems like we’ll need to discuss again what to do after the battle with Oscillatory. They didn’t yield to us for free; we paid the Burst Points, so it would rankle to give it back for nothing.”

“But it was Graph who paid, right?”

“His points belong to me, my points belong to me,” Kuroyukihime declared, her face clear, and then furrowed her brow once more. “Setting the matter of Shibuya aside, Minato Three will definitely be attacked by Oscillatory. If they can maintain their battle formation until next Saturday, that is.”

“Platinum Cavalier said that not a single member would leave even if the five Legions launched an all-out attack,” he reminded her. “But just because he said that doesn’t mean that all the members’ll be able to keep winning all their duels. The Seven Dwarves are one thing, but the general membership won’t be able to hold out against successive challenges from high rankers. Of course, they could also just keep their global connection off, but then they wouldn’t be able to defend the Territories at all.”

“That’s just it. Once the general attack begins, no matter how solid the Legion’s union is, half of the members will be driven to total point loss. I’d hope that as many of those members as possible would leave of their own free will before that, but...” Kuroyukihime let out a self-deprecating sigh and then immediately continued. “Fearing the kings’ general attack, cut the global connection and withdraw... I did that for two years. If you hadn’t come to Umesato Junior High and gotten that incredible score in the virtual squash game, I would still be spending my days in obscurity—no, in ruin. Someone like me has no right to dictate the choices of the members of Oscillatory.”

“It’s the same for me. No, *especially* for me...” Haruyuki wrapped his arms tightly around his knees and held back the various feelings boiling up within him, carefully picking out each word. “If you hadn’t shown up in the squash corner that day and talked to me, I’d still be walking around staring at my feet. If you hadn’t given me the Brain Burst program, I never would have realized that the Accelerated World—the *real* world—is so big. I’m sure it’s the same for Oscillatory’s rank-and-file membership... Which is why it’s only natural to want them to realize that what their king and the Society are doing is wrong.”

“Mmm... I suppose. Yes, you’re right.” Still staring out the front

windshield, Kuroyukihime moved her hand to gently clasp Haruyuki's.

The automatic taxi headed southwest on the narrow road of the residential area and turned left at Inokashira-dori Street. From there, it was a mere five minutes to the Keio Line's Sasazuka Station. When they got out of the taxi, the busy sounds of the neighborhood closed in on them. Restaurants and convenience stores and assorted shops lined the broad sidewalks, with many people coming and going between them.

"Rose just said 'Sasazuka,' yes?" Kuroyukihime asked. "We're fifteen minutes early for the meeting. Should we just wait here?"

"Um, I'll check." When he launched his mailer and let her know that they had arrived, he got an immediate reply. "Oh! She says she's at the Sasazuka Library by the station's south entrance."

"The library?" Kuroyukihime frowned for a moment, but then quickly nodded. "Let's go then. There will definitely be social cameras in a public facility, so there's no need to fear PK—a real attack."

"I guess not..."

And even if there is, I'll be your shield, Haruyuki resolved in his heart and started walking ahead of her.

When they crossed Koshu Kaido and slipped under the overhead Keio Line tracks, the tall, gray multiuse structure came into sight on their right. According to his Neurolinker navigation, the Sasazuka Library was on the fourth floor. Passing through the nicely chilled entryway, they took the elevator up, and found the entrance was immediately to their right. After exchanging a glance, the two Burst Linkers went inside.

Much of the space, which was larger than he'd expected, was taken up with tables for browsing; there were only a few bookcases up against the wall in the back. This was only natural given that new paper editions were practically extinct, but there was a service that allowed visitors to view electronic books for free within the facility, so about 60 percent of the tables were occupied by adults and students studying. Haruyuki cast a furtive glance around the room and discovered more than twenty girls who looked like they could be in junior high or high school, so he couldn't decide which one was Rose Milady—or even if she was there at all. There were also private rooms along the wall on the left side for users of audiovisual material, but it was impossible to check inside these.

"How about we sit down, at any rate?" Kuroyukihime murmured, so he nodded and they sat down at a table alongside one another.

After letting out a sigh, he was about to send Rose a message to say they had arrived, but before he could, his mail icon flashed, and he reflexively tapped it.

ONCE YOU GET TO THE LIBRARY, GO INTO THE FOURTH VIEWING BOOTH. AT

EXACTLY 9:35, THE DOOR WILL BE UNLOCKED FOR JUST THREE SECONDS.

“.....”

Haruyuki wordlessly made his mailer visible and slid it to his side. After glancing at it, Kuroyukihime checked the time and groaned.

“Mmm. So, in other words, she’s telling us to do a full dive in the booth or accelerate. I’m reluctant to leave our real bodies defenseless. But we can’t exactly disobey her instructions.”

“I... guess. And there should be social cameras in the booth, too.”

While they were talking, the specified time approached, so they both stood up together. They walked over to the fourth viewing booth—or they started to, but then realized that if Rose was somewhere in the room, it would be possible to crack them in the real from this movement. But they couldn’t hesitate now. They took care to at least not look back as they moved, timed it right, and finally ended up in front of the booth.

The indicator light on the door was red for “in use,” but just as had been specified in the mail, the moment the clock hit 9:35 AM, it changed to green. Kuroyukihime immediately reached out and opened the door.

The small space was deserted; in the center sat a single large reclining chair, and on the table farther back was a flat monitor for non-Neurolinker users. He felt like he’d seen this before, and then it hit him: This was just like the private booths in the dive café that hosted the duel holy ground of Akihabara BG. That experience had been intensely close because he and Pard had forced themselves into a chair meant for one. Would the same scenario play out again here? He was still wondering over it when Kuroyukihime gave his back a push and got them both inside before closing the door. He heard the lock snapping back in place.

“Now then,” she huffed. “What’s the next instruction?”

The reclining chair before them spun halfway around and Haruyuki leapt back with a shriek, but Kuroyukihime’s hand came up and covered his mouth. Her other hand was thrust out like Black Lotus’s sword.

Seated in the chair was a fairly small girl, looking like she might be in elementary school or junior high; it was hard for him to tell. Her uniform was a bright, light-blue dress. Her hair was cut short, all one length, and the front covered her face, so he could basically only see her left eye.

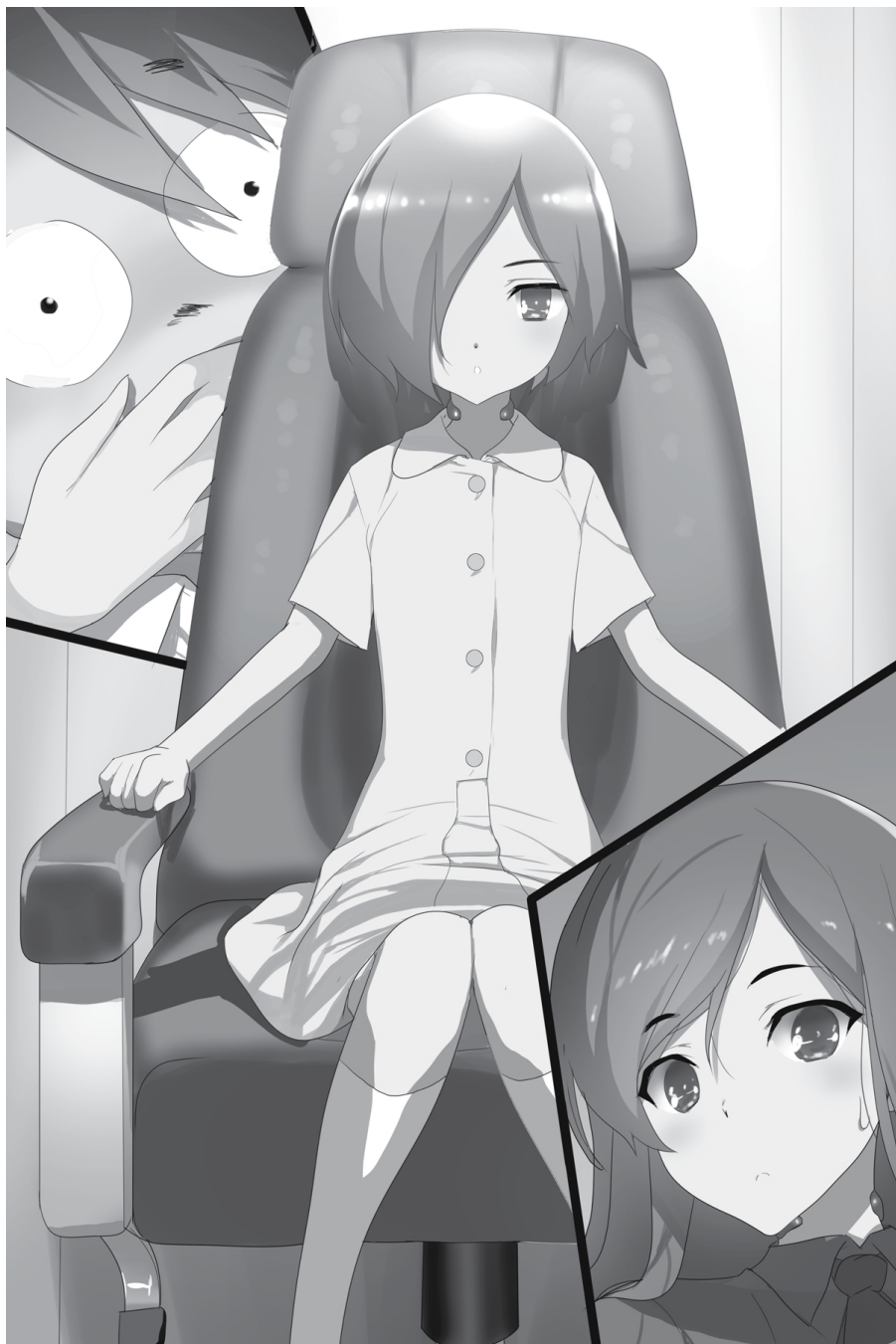
After observing the frozen pair for two silent seconds, the girl said coolly, “I’m sorry for calling you out here. But this was the only place I could think of where we could talk securely in the real without spending any money.”

Her slightly husky voice sounded young for her age. But even so,

it had the same sweet ring to it as in the Accelerated World. Haruyuki was certain that the girl before them was Rose Milady, and he relaxed his shoulders. Kuroyukihime also lowered her hand.

“Oh, it was no trouble to come here,” she said. “But I’m surprised you would reveal yourself to us. I simply assumed that from here we would do a dive call or accelerate.”

“A dive call’s risky. And a duel stage is even more dangerous. This was the only place to eliminate the possibility of pursuit or eavesdropping,” Rose replied and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt with both hands before standing up from the reclining chair. “There’s only one chair, so you sit, Lotus.”



Kuroyukihime glanced at Haruyuki before shrugging slightly. “I would ask how you determined I’m Black Lotus... but I suppose there’s no point.”

“It’s just, no matter how you look at it, you’re Lotus and that’s Crow.”

The (likely) younger girl turned her clever gaze on Haruyuki and he shrank into himself.

“B-but I don’t think I look very much like my duel avatar,” he told her.

“I’m in the same boat.”

When she said this, he was forced to agree. Rose Milady’s avatar was tall and lean with thorns covering her entire body, a total one-eighty from the compact girl in front of him—Well, maybe not a full one-eighty, but certainly a hundred and fifty degrees different.

“Um, what grade are you in?” he asked automatically, and Rose glared at him from the gap in her hair.

“Why do you need that information?”

“O-oh, I just mean, if you’re cool with sharing,” he quickly backtracked.

“Ninth.”

“What?” he yelped in surprise.

Instantly, Rose’s left eye glittered with a dangerous light. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I—I just...”

Thought you were in elementary school was something he couldn’t very well say, and so Haruyuki gave voice to another thought that would likely not offend and was still also not quite a lie.

“The impression I got when you were talking with Raker in the Highest Level was that you were in high school, too, so...”

“Raker’s in high school?” she returned immediately, and he realized that he had accidentally leaked her real info, but it was too late.

He glanced at Kuroyukihime, but she just shrugged, so he nodded in resignation. “Sh-she is...”

“Hmph. And you?”

“Eighth...”

When Rose turned her silent gaze on her, Kuroyukihime replied smoothly, “Ninth.”

“I see. Are we going to exchange real names, too?”

“If that’s what you want, we would be amenable.”

Rose’s face took on a slightly thoughtful look, but she quickly said, “Then I’ll have you amended,” and ran a finger through the air.

The name tag that she sent had three characters in a rather

standard rose-red font. He had no idea how to read the characters since there was no phonetic pronunciation accompanying them, but when he squinted at the roman letters below the Japanese characters, he discovered that they were apparently read “Tsubomi Koshika.” The mail address also noted on the tag was the same as the address she’d used to contact him.

When he sent his tag in return, Rose aka Tsubomi nodded at him and then looked at Kuroyukihime’s tag. “Is this really your real name?” She scowled. “It does have the resident registry approval stamp, but...”

“Let’s leave it at that,” Kuroyukihime said. “You may call me Kuroyuki or Hime, as you wish.”

“... Okay, Kuroyuki it is. Call me Koshika.”

“Tsubomi’s not allowed?”

“I hate my name.”

“Understood. Well then, Koshika, shall we get right to the heart of the matter?” Kuroyukihime remained leaning against the door of the booth rather than moving to sit in the reclining chair that had been yielded to her. “I think our business and your business might be one and the same.”

“What?!” Haruyuki shouted.

But Tsubomi’s expression didn’t change in the slightest. “I suppose they are.”

Here, Haruyuki, too, finally remembered the last words Rose Milady had spoken when they’d encountered her on the Highest Level the previous day: “I’ll do what has to be done for Orchid Oracle’s sake, and for Saffron Blossom’s.”

“K-Koshika,” Haruyuki said, and she finally turned her gaze on him.

“What?”

“Um...” He paused. “So do you mean you have some information connected to rescuing Oracle?”

For the first time since the conversation had begun, something resembling a smile—clearly somewhat wry—rose up on the petite girl’s lips. “Just as impatient in the real, hmm? Putting to waste the tactics Kuroyuki and I are attempting to use here.”

“Huh? Oh. I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine,” she told him. “I want to cut out all the niceties, too. It’s true, I do have some information on Orkki’s—Oracle’s—current situation. To trade for that, I want you to present your information to me.”

Haruyuki swallowed his breath, but Kuroyukihime’s reaction was as cool as ever.

“It depends on the kind of information you’re seeking,” she said.

“But that is basically what we’d like as well. However, before we begin the information exchange, there’s one thing I’d like to confirm.”

She stepped away from the door and walked over to Tsubomi, who was still standing beside the reclining chair. It wasn’t that Kuroyukihime was particularly tall for a ninth grader, but Tsubomi’s stature was small enough that she could be mistaken for an elementary school student, so there was a significant height difference when they faced each other.

But Tsubomi looked up at the Black King with a resolute attitude that recalled the third of the Seven Dwarves. She cocked her head slightly to one side, almost as if to say *What then?*

“You have revealed yourself in the real to us like this and are trying to save Orchid Oracle, thought to be held by Black Vise aka Ivory Tower,” Kuroyukihime began, her voice extremely quiet but still clearly audible. “In other words, Rose Milady, I believe you have chosen the path of estrangement from Oscillatory and the White King?”

Haruyuki saw a shadow of fleeting anguish cross Tsubomi’s face. But that vanished immediately, and the small high ranker assented quietly. “Think that if you like. My priority is Oracle’s life, over the greater mission of the Legion.”

“Her... life? That’s...” Kuroyukihime’s voice cut out there, so Haruyuki shifted his gaze to the swordmaster.

He understood that the “life” Tsubomi Koshika had uttered was referring of course to Orchid Oracle aka Megumi Wakamiya’s life as a Burst Linker. But Tsubomi surprised him with what she said next.

“If things continue like this, Oracle’s life in the real world might be in danger, too,” she told them, voice low and strained. “Unless we hurry to stop the acceleration, there’s a possibility her soul won’t be able to return to her body.”

“H-her soul? What do you mean?” Kuroyukihime’s eyes grew wide.

“Soul’s a convenient expression,” Tsubomi said, shaking her head, a vexed look on her face. “But as far as I can understand, that’s the only word that works. Accelerated Burst Linkers think by using exclusive quantum circuits established in the Brain Burst central server, also known as the Main Visualizer. And with the end of acceleration, the connection to that circuit is cut, and the memories are synced...”

Haruyuki had a bit of a hard time digesting this explanation. He took a step forward from the wall opposite the girls where he’d been making himself small. “H-hang on a minute. Thinking with circuits, syncing memories... Are you saying we’re not using our own brains while we’re accelerated?”

“Put simply, that’s exactly it.” Tsubomi nodded. “This way, the BB system avoids the life span of the Burst Linker’s soul consuming large quantities of resources. The reason memories are a little muddled when you stop accelerating by physically pulling off the Neurolinker compared with bursting out normally is because there’s a lag in the memory sync process. Only the tiniest bit, but still.”

“Memory... sync...” This reminded Haruyuki of Rin Kusakabe when he’d seen for the first time in a while at the Legion meeting the previous night. She accelerated using the Neurolinker of her actual older brother Rinta Kusakabe, who was in a coma in the hospital, and dueling as Ash Roller. But she could only hazily remember the things that happened during acceleration. If the reason for that was because the memory sync didn’t work properly because of her unique circumstances...

Tsubomi turned her eyes from the silent Haruyuki back to Kuroyukihime. “Right now, Oracle is being used—no, *abused*—by the organization and connected to a quantum circuit that’s not her own. If this continues, the shape of her soul will become twisted, and the system won’t be able to sync her memories. Not only that, it’s even a possibility that she won’t be able to come back from the Accelerated World.”

“Not able to come back?” Kuroyukihime asked. “Even if her Neurolinker is pulled from her neck?”

“If you could pull it off and get her far enough away, then maybe.” Tsubomi shrugged. “But in that case, her memories wouldn’t be able to sync normally, and it might have some kind of negative effect on her personality. I can’t expose her to that sort of danger. We have to do whatever it takes to get Oracle to burst out from the Accelerated World normally.” She yanked up her face and grabbed Kuroyukihime’s arm. “That’s all the info I can provide right now. Now it’s your turn to cooperate.”

She nodded. “Understood. What do you want to know about Oracle?”

“More like where do I want to go: to Oracle in the real world.”

Upon leaving the Sasazuka Library, Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki, and Tsubomi Koshika got into another taxi on Koshu Kaido. Of course, it was also an automatic vehicle, though not a two-seater this time; it was a vehicle for four, with front and back seats. Haruyuki sat in the front passenger seat, while Kuroyukihime and Tsubomi climbed into the back.

“I see,” Kuroyukihime said softly as the car pulled out. “I wondered why Sasazuka, but it was because you guessed that Oracle’s house is in this area.”

“I did,” Tsubomi confirmed. “Way back in the day, before we joined Oscillatory, Oracle talked about the Sasazuka Library. So I figured she had to be nearby.”

“Hmm. But Oracle’s house—actually, I can just tell you her real name at this point.” Kuroyukihime operated her virtual desktop. “Oracle’s real name is Megumi Wakamiya. She’s a member of the literary club at Umesato Junior High in Suginami, where Haruyuki and I go to school, and she’s also the secretary of the student council.”

As she stared intently into the space where Megumi’s name was likely displayed, Tsubomi finally spoke, her voice extremely quiet. “Megumi... Wakamiya. She’s always loved books. Even in the Unlimited Neutral Field, she’d always be sitting and reading, holding this enormous book, although who knows where she got it.”

“In the Accelerated World? What kind of book was it?” Kuroyukihime asked.

Tsubomi blinked once before answering. “I’m pretty sure there wasn’t a title on the front or back cover. Instead, it had glass of all different colors embedded in it like patchwork. It was really pretty. But back then, I had zero interest in books, so I’d get in a bad mood whenever I found Oracle reading it. She never made a face at me, though. She’d just close the book and come with me to hunt Enemies or look for a shop.”

“You said that you didn’t know either why Oracle—Megumi—lost all her points after joining Oscillatory?” Kuroyukihime asked.

“Yeah. One day, she was suddenly gone. When I asked the Legion members what happened, no one—not even Cosmos—knew. I could only assume she’d been attacked by a powerful Enemy somewhere and lost all her points. I was pretty upset, and Cosmos promised she’d bring Orkki back someday. And then right before the Territories the other day, Orkki really did come back...” Tsubomi trailed off.

“But even that was one part of the White King and the Acceleration Research Society’s plot,” Kuroyukihime noted. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was Cosmos herself who drove Oracle to total point loss. Just like she did with your parent, Saffron Blossom.”

Tsubomi Koshika didn’t move to reply but rather hugged her knees to her chest as she curled up on the seat. When she did, she looked every bit the child, and Haruyuki turned back around to stare out the front windshield.

The taxi was running west along Kosshu Kaido. The address for Megumi Wakamiya registered with Umesato Junior High was about two kilometers from Sasazuka in Suginami’s Shimotakaido. Because it was a weekday, the lanes were empty of traffic, and in a few minutes, the turn signal was blinking as they pulled to the side of the road.

They got out of the car, crossed the green area that had once been

the Tama River, and entered the residential neighborhood. One of the stylish bungalows lined up opposite a large temple was their destination, the Wakamiya house. Even though they had been good friends for some time, this was Kuroyukihime's first visit to Megumi's house, and it was with a nervous look that she moved to press the button on the intercom. But then her finger stopped in midair and she looked at Tsubomi standing next to her.

"Koshika, according to what you said, Megumi's been accelerated ever since the end of the Territories two days ago... Is that right?"

"Yes, I think so." Tsubomi nodded.

"Then her family will no doubt have been wondering why—No, at this point, they'll be looking for real reasons why Megumi hasn't woken up in more than twenty-four hours." She cleared her throat and pressed the button.

They heard the tinkling of the chime, and then a few seconds later, a woman's voice in response.

Kuroyukihime explained the reason for their visit, and the woman—apparently, Megumi's mother—informed them in a somehow businesslike tone that Megumi had been in the hospital since the day before.

Their third taxi ride of the morning was six kilometers long and took approximately twenty minutes.

The car had no sooner stopped at their destination, the National Center for Child Health and Development, than Kuroyukihime and Tsubomi were flying out of the door. They trotted along at a brisk pace, seemingly fighting the urge to break into a run, and Haruyuki chased after them.

Though this high-level medical facility was known to be the largest in the city, the sheer scale of the beige building still exceeded his wildest expectations. They cut across the expansive lobby on the first floor and headed for the intake reception counter. When they presented the visitation request form Megumi's mother had authenticated for them in the entryway of her house, they were immediately issued digital visitor permits, and they showed these as they got onto the elevator. The group got off on the tenth floor of the treatment wing, and after stopping at the nurse's station, they followed the navigation down the hallway.

That reminds me. This is where Magenta's friend Avocado Avider is hospitalized, Haruyuki suddenly thought as he walked along, but there was no way he could accelerate and go after him in a duel. To start with, although the three of them would appear on the matching list for this area, Setagaya No. 5, the fact that they had received absolutely no challenges was either because this was an empty area or because Great Wall, who controlled it, had issued some kind of directive.

As he turned these thoughts over in his mind, the green navigation line disappeared in front of a private room on the east side. The door automatically unlocked and opened with the faint whirring of a motor. He smelled a vaguely sweet fragrance mixed in with the scent of sanitizer.

Kuroyukihime froze in place and Tsubomi gave her a slight push. With awkward steps, the girls went through the doorway, and Haruyuki followed.

The room was small and dimly lit, though sunlight came through

the curtains and gently illuminated the bed by the window. Pale-peach flowers were in the small vase set out on the sideboard. From the shape, they were probably in the orchid family, but Haruyuki didn't know the cultivar name.

A girl with fluffy hair lay next to these flowers, as if they were watching over her, her eyes closed. Around her slender neck was a Neurolinker the same color as the orchids.

"... Megumi," Kuroyukihime murmured and approached the bed, but then she froze, unable to reach out to her friend.

Tsubomi stood on the opposite side, and she, too, stopped moving. Her face twisted slightly and her lips moved for a moment, but he couldn't hear what she said.

Haruyuki dropped his gaze to the bed once more. He didn't sense any suffering in Megumi Wakamiya's face; she looked like she was sleeping peacefully. But according to her mother, she hadn't woken up once since Saturday evening. It was Sunday morning when her mother naturally found this strange. At that point, she'd called an ambulance, and Megumi was taken to the hospital for testing. They couldn't find any abnormalities, such as a cerebral hemorrhage, but they admitted her anyway because of the extremely slow pace of her brain waves.

It bothered him that Megumi's mother had been excessively dispassionate as she explained all this to Haruyuki and his friends, but it might have just looked like that to him because she was in a state of psychological distress. Of course, *they* knew the reason why Megumi wasn't waking up, so it was hard not to be able to tell her. But he also knew that she wouldn't have believed them even if they had explained it.

At any rate, Megumi Wakamiya had been accelerated from past four in the afternoon on Saturday when the Territories had ended to the present moment, at least forty-two hours. In the Accelerated World, that was 1,750 days—four years and 290 days. Haruyuki had never stayed on the other side for so long.

Perhaps thinking the same thing, Kuroyukihime began to speak. "W-we have to hurry and stop Megumi's acceleration. Koshika, you had some idea in coming here, yes? How can we safely wake her up?"

"....."

Tsubomi silently put a hand into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a white XSB cable. As she connected one plug to Megumi's Neurolinker, she looked at Kuroyukihime and said, "Orkki's consciousness is being held captive by one of Wolfram Cerberus's three quantum circuits. But Orkki's own duel avatar also has to exist somewhere in the Unlimited Neutral Field. We find her and get her out through a portal. It's the only way."

"Find her? But how in the world...?" Kuroyukihime was at a loss.

“The Unlimited Neutral Field is for all intents and purposes infinitely large.”

“That’s the reason for the wired connection. I don’t have time to explain in detail, but basically, I might be able to trace Orkki this way. If I don’t wake up in five minutes, take my Neurolinker off,” Tsubomi told her and plopped herself down on the floor beside the bed.

Seeing that she was about to accelerate at any second, Haruyuki hurriedly interjected, “Please wait a moment! I-I’ll go, too!” He pulled his own XSB cable from his pocket and held out the plug.

Tsubomi glared up at him from behind her curtain of hair. “I don’t need a wired connection with you. For that matter, I don’t need you at all... But if you want to come, I won’t stop you.” She accepted the plug and connected it to her Neurolinker.

As he plugged the other end into his own Neurolinker, Haruyuki looked at Kuroyukihime. She probably wanted nothing more than to go and save Megumi, too. But that was impossible. The moment she entered the Unlimited Neutral Field, she would materialize not in this hospital but inside of Inti, and die instantly within the nuclear conflagration.

“Kuroyukihime... We’ll definitely...,” Haruyuki vowed, staring straight into her obsidian eyes. “We’ll definitely save Wakamiya. So please have faith in us and wait.”

“I have faith in you.” Kuroyukihime nodded and patted his arm before turning her eyes to Tsubomi, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees. “Koshika—no, Tsubomi. I leave Haruyuki and Megumi to you.”

“Orkki ranks higher in my list of priorities,” Tsubomi said bluntly. “But well, I’ll do what I can. Hurry it up, Crow.”

Haruyuki quickly sat down next to Tsubomi, and she immediately started the countdown.

“Three, two, one...”

He took a sharp breath and shouted with her, ““Unlimited Burst!!””

“A Moonlight stage, hmm?”

When he opened his eyes, he could see an enormous moon hanging in the inky black sky. The hospital building had turned into a large, white marble temple. All the walls were gone, leaving only pillars behind, so he could look out over the entire floor. He sent his gaze racing around the area, but of course, he found no sign of Megumi nor Kuroyukihime.

Renewing the words of his pre-dive vow as he clenched his teeth, Haruyuki looked at Rose Milady’s F-type avatar standing next to him.

This was the third time he’d faced her, including once on the Highest Level, but no matter how often he saw her avatar, he was still blown away each time. The sharp spikes that glittered on her incredibly slender limbs and torso embodied the aphorism “no rose without a thorn” perfectly. If she were to stand alongside Magenta Scissor, who had a similar avatar design, the sight promised to be even more picturesque, but he wouldn’t get the chance to see that anytime soon.

While these vague thoughts drifted through his head, Rose Milady glared at him with eyes lenses that were half hidden by her gorgeous ringlets. “Silver Crow, you can’t just gape at F-type avatars like that.”

“H-hyah, I’m sorry!” He reflexively took on his flash-frozen pose, while he marveled at how the one giving voice to that line was the teensy, cute Tsubomi Koshika. He felt a fuzzy warmth in his heart, but he had the good sense to know she would inflict real pain on him if he told her that. So he kept quiet and instead shifted his gaze to the transparent outer edge of the temple. “S-so how are we going to look for Oracle?”

“I can think of two ways.”

“Huh? T-two...?”

“One must have already occurred to you.”

He finally remembered the conversation he’d had with Kuroyukihime at the Legion meeting the previous evening. They’d had the blacksmith in mind then, but the logic was the same. “Maybe the Highest Level?”

“Yes.” The aristocratic avatar looked up at the pale night scene spreading out beyond the temple grounds. “If we shift up, we’ll have a bird’s-eye view of the Mean Level. But it’ll be a Herculean task to pick out Orkki from the vast number of points of light.”

“I... guess so,” he agreed. “If we did find a light that was potentially her, we’d have to leave the Highest Level and go check every time.”

“I’m prepared to do it if it comes to that,” she told him. “But those five minutes I promised Lotus are three days, eleven hours, and twenty minutes over here. If we shift up, the time will pass pretty quickly. So before we go to the Highest Level, we’ll try the other method.”

“A-and that is?” Haruyuki asked Rose’s profile, and he was entirely unprepared for her reply.

“Divination.”

“D-divination?!”

“Listen. I’m not going to whip out a pack of tarot cards or burn turtle shells or anything, okay?” Rose snarked. And then she proceeded to tell him that she was going to the roof as she started toward the center of the temple. When he chased after her, he saw a spiral staircase that shot through the building. They climbed three floors of marble to come out on top of the temple.

There were no tall buildings around them, so they had a full view of the picturesque Moonlight stage, and Haruyuki unconsciously let out a sigh. The Moonlight stage had once been the site of his decisive battle with the twilight marauder Dusk Taker, and his memories of that difficult fight remained fresh. But the stage was still beautiful to him; the otherworldly temples illuminated in the pale moonglow.

Meanwhile, Rose began destroying the circular pillars that stood boldly on the broad roof, as if to say they didn’t have time to be awestruck by the scenery. Haruyuki hurried to join in the destruction to charge his special-attack gauge.

The efficiency of charging through the destruction of terrain objects was poor, but since there were too many pillars to count, he was fully charged in less than three minutes. When he returned to a position near Rose, who had finished charging a moment before he did, the noblewoman raised her arm with its rows of crimson spikes up high. Turning her palm to the night sky, she slowly called out a technique name.

“Flower Divination.”

Instantly, a flash of purplish-pink light emitted from the palm of her hand, and Haruyuki narrowed his eyes below his mirrored mask.

The light quickly came together in a point, but rather than disappearing, it created a large bud in her hand. This opened up into a

circle of roses that had no sooner burst into bloom than they began to scatter beautifully. Dozens of petals spilled out into the air and simply drifted gently for a moment before finally being swept in a line outside the building, despite the lack of wind.

Watching the glittering ribbon go off on its way, Rose murmured, "East by northeast. You remember which way the petals flew off, too."

"O-okay. Is that maybe the direction of Oracle?"

"I don't know. It's divination at best. The technique I used tells me the whereabouts of what I need now."

"What you need?" he asked.

"It depends on the stage attributes," she replied. "But in a normal duel, that'd be charging items or weapons or vehicles. So... it might be that the petals are simply attracted to that sort of object. In fact, I've tried divining her whereabouts several times since yesterday, but every time, that's what happened. Right now, though, I'm directing with Orkki in the real world. All I can do is have faith that this connection will guide the flowers."

Rose started to turn back to the stairs, but Haruyuki hurried to stop her. "B-but we can't see the petals anymore."

"They fly without concern for the terrain, so it's impossible to chase them forever. The only option is to remember the direction and use the technique periodically. At any rate, once we get down to the first floor, we'll go east on Setagaya-dori in front of the hospital—"

"In that case, I'll carry you!" Haruyuki interrupted, forcefully deploying the silver wings on his back. "If I fly at full speed, we might be able to catch up with those petals!"

He reached out his hands, but Rose pulled away and looked at him suspiciously.

"Carry? ...How, exactly?"

"Huh? Um, w-well," he stammered. "It would be similar to a hug."

Rose followed this with an exasperated sigh. Maybe it wasn't the best idea to suddenly hug someone who was your enemy until just recently, and in that case, he was about to tell her that she could also just hold on to his legs if that was better for her.

But suddenly, the spikes all over her body withdrew into her armor with a sharp *klak*. She took a step toward the dumbfounded silver avatar and held up her arms. "Okay, hug away."

"O-okay." Nodding, Haruyuki placed his arm around Rose's back and carefully lifted her legs with his other hand. Once she was secured in his arms, bridal-style, he vibrated his wings carefully, about fifty percent of normal power, and took off.

After ascending about twenty meters, he narrowed his eyes east by northeast and felt like he saw a pink light flickering faintly. He wouldn't have been able to pick it out if they hadn't been in a night

stage, but now that he had it in his sights, he started to soar.

“Hmm,” Rose muttered, once they had been moving for about ten seconds. “So this is the lone flight ability in the Accelerated World.”

“A-actually, it seems like it’s not so rare after all,” Haruyuki replied. “Platinum Cavalier of the Seven Dwarves was also flying and all.”

The aristocrat snorted. “Bashful’s Pegasus just does what its Enhanced Armament Mystical Reins tells it to. That’s not his own power.”

“Huh. Can he tame any Enemy with that item?”

“Not even close. As a general rule, it’s only those who he fights one-on-one and defeats. So the majority of the Legend class are out of the question. Naturally, he can’t use it on Inti, either.”

“Oh...” Haruyuki turned his gaze back to the small light in front of them.

Fortunately, the flower petals didn’t move quickly, and even prioritizing his gauge and flying conservatively, the petals seemed to be slowly catching up with them. He banished all extraneous thought from his mind and focused on the mission ahead.

“Those petals have already traveled a fair distance, hmm? Which maybe means they’re not being pulled in by some kind of item,” he suggested. “And to start with, items almost never pop up in the Moonlight stage.”

“Right. But...” Rose glanced off to the right. “I actually had some idea of a place where Orkki might be locked up. But looks like we’re slipping off that course bit by bit.”

“Huh?” He looked down at her. “Where?”

“You must have attacked it once yourself,” she said. “The Eternal Girls’ Academy in Minato Area Three. It’s the headquarters for Oscillatory Universe and also the school I attend.”

“What?!” he cried out and his hand slipped just a little, causing Rose to swing in his arms.

“Eep!” The lady let out an adorable shriek and grabbed hold of Haruyuki’s neck. “H-hey! Hang on tight! If I fall from this height, even I won’t come out unscathed!”

I’m amazed it wouldn’t outright kill you, Haruyuki thought, then bobbed his head up and down. “I-I’m sorry. I was a little surprised. So then the blue dress you were wearing in the real world is the Eternal uniform.”

“EGA,” she corrected.

“What?”

“People who call Eternal Girls’ Academy ‘Eternal’ are cursed for a hundred and thirty years, so be careful.”

“Oh! ...O-okay.” Nodding once more, he returned to the subject at

hand. “It’s true that if they were going to lock Oracle up, there’s a strong possibility that it would be in Oscillatory’s headquarters. But...”

He gained a little altitude and sent his gaze racing across the snowy white buildings spread out below them.

“If that road is Kannana, and the one that looks like Suidobashi intersecting it is the Shibuya Expressway... then the direction is definitely off. The petals seem like they’re not flying toward Minato Three but Shibuya One.”

“Right. Once we pass Shibuya, Aoyama, Akasaka, and then... the Castle.”

The instant Rose said this, Haruyuki very nearly stiffened up once again, and he hurried to hold her more tightly. “No way. Oracle in the Castle?! There’s no way just the two of us will be able to charge the four gates!”

Rose shook her head. “I really can’t imagine that’s where she is. I heard the Divine Light ability of the Luminary also doesn’t work on the Four Gods.”

“That’s... the power that tamed Inti, right?”

“Yes. One of the critical pieces to realize the White King’s plan.”

“... Plan?” The word Rose spoke so casually lingered strangely in his ears, and Haruyuki parroted it back to her. “What exactly is this plan?”

But instead of answering him, Rose pointed up ahead with one hand. “Look. The petals are passing Shibuya Station. I wonder how far they’ll go.”

“I just hope it’s not the Castle,” Haruyuki replied with some dread, then glanced at his special-attack gauge. Thanks to his level-five flight ability enhancement bonus that gave him four layered gauges, his mileage had gotten a lot better, but even so, he’d used over 60 percent of his gauge traveling from Setagaya to Shibuya carrying Rose. There were a lot of Enemies wandering about on the ground in this area, so he didn’t want to land if it was at all possible.

“Still... that’s a mysterious power,” he said, half to himself. “The ‘thing that you need.’ Who’s deciding that, though?”

“The BB system, I guess. Right now, I’m not seeking weapons or items. All I want is for Orkki to come back to me safely. If it means making that happen, I’m okay even with losing all my points today.” Her hand tightened just a little around Haruyuki’s neck.

Orchid Oracle—Megumi Wakamiya—was Kuroyukihime’s best friend. But to Rose Milady, she was a fellow child of Saffron Blossom, meaning the two of them were practically sisters. Since only the Originators were permitted to have multiple children, this was a bond that people of Haruyuki’s generation simply could not relate to.

“In Chrome Falcon’s memories,” Haruyuki started, and Rose shivered slightly, “Saffron said she wanted to make children, form a collaborative Legion, and someday laugh and play the game with everyone in the Accelerated World. Although she had no idea how long it would take to do that... I think both you and Oracle were the embodiment of her hope, Rose. So... So I...” Here, he reached the limits of his verbal abilities, and unable to put all the things welling up in his heart into words, he simply took several shallow breaths.

Whap.

Whap. Whap. In a somewhat awkward movement, Rose was hitting his neck. “Right. Even hypothetically, a Burst Linker can’t go saying they’re fine with total point loss. I’m going to rescue Orkki and take her back to Lotus. So you help, too. Using the power you beat me with.”

“N-no,” he protested. “Even with Lead and Bell’s help, I was really just barely—Oh!”

Rose quickly turned her head at his cry.

A few hundred meters ahead, the shining pink ribbon was gently descending. Below it rose a massive skyscraper. Like the surrounding buildings, it had been transformed into a chalky temple, but the design of the exterior walls—multiple sheets joined together—was familiar to him.

“That’s...,” he started. “Is it maybe Midtown Tower?”

“Looks like it,” she agreed. “But why would the petals stop there?”

The two Burst Linkers stared wordlessly for a moment at the massive tower bathed in moonlight.

Tokyo Midtown Tower was where the Acceleration Research Society had set the ISS kit main body and had it guarded by the Archangel Metatron after she had been tamed by the Luminary. But Metatron—just her first form, of course—was defeated in Nega Nebulus’s general attack, and Kuroyukihime’s team had also destroyed the ISS kit main body. After that, the Acceleration Research Society had abandoned Midtown Tower as a base. Or so he’d thought.

Ahead of them, the swarm of flower petals danced down to the roof of the tower, carving out a spiral in the air, and flashed like fireworks before disappearing.

“Looks like we’ll just have to go in,” Rose said.

“I have a bad feeling about this, though,” Haruyuki told her, although he had already made the same decision in his heart. He had about 20 percent left in his special-attack gauge, and if he glided part of the way, they could reach the tower even if he increased their speed slightly.

“Here we go.” He increased the vibrations of his metal fins. As he cut through the moonlight and accelerated, the massive pale tower

piercing the night sky grew nearer in the blink of an eye. He had naturally taken a course with the intention of landing on the roof, but suddenly his partner stopped him.

“Hang on for a sec!” Rose whisper-hissed, so he hurried to drop his speed.

“Wh-what’s wrong?!”

“There’s an Enemy on the roof.”

“What?!” He strained his eyes as he shifted to hovering mode, but he could only see a small spire in the center of the wide roof; nothing was moving. If an Enemy was somewhere on that roof, it would have to be in the shadow of the spire.

“Oh!” Finally catching sight of it, Haruyuki unconsciously tightened his arms.

Something blacker than the thick shadows stood furtively—almost glued—to the side of the spire. The silhouette was human shaped, but from this distance, he couldn’t tell if it was an Enemy or a large Burst Linker.

“H-how do you know it’s an Enemy?”

“Take a good look at the head.”

He did as he was told and focused his gaze on the head of the silhouette. It caught the light of the moon reflected off the roof, and he noticed a silver flash in the shape of a ring.

“Oh, it’s like some kind of crown.” His own words kicked at his memories, and he groaned. “That... Is it maybe the Luminary’s...”

“There’s no mistake,” she told him firmly. “The Luminary’s an Enhanced Armament made up of two parts: diadem and scepter. The diadem produces a crown of thorns to tame the Enemy, and the scepter controls it. It’s possible to yield the scepter to another Burst Linker temporarily, but the owner in the end is the person equipped with the diadem—the White King.”

“Two in one.” He pondered this. “So then the staff Black Vise and Platinum Cavalier had wasn’t the main body of the Arc.”

“Exactly. I’ve never seen Cosmos let go of the diadem.”

“In that case... maybe it’s not just that black Enemy in Midtown Tower, but whoever in Oscillatory has the scepter?”

Milady thought a few seconds before replying. “The only possibility there would be Black Vise, given he has the ability to decelerate. But as far as I know, Vise died along with the five kings and hasn’t regenerated. To regenerate, he’d need to move Inti for a few minutes at the very least, and if the kings detected that, they could escape from the Unlimited EK, and then it would all have been for nothing. You all are probably watching Inti’s movement through some means or another, right?”

“Uh. Well, kinda...”

In fact, the one keeping an eye on Inti was Graphite Edge, who belonged to Great Wall, but he omitted these details. Rose didn't seem to find anything suspicious about his response as she stared down at Midtown Tower, which was about three hundred meters away.

"In the most likely scenario," she continued, "Inti won't move until the White King and Black Vise's plan reaches its final stage. So if you're going to try and rescue Lotus and the other kings, you'd best assume that destroying Inti is your only option."

This word "plan" echoed in his ears once more, but he gave up on chasing that down for the moment.

"Right," he said. "We're investigating ways to attack with that premise. Or like... this is just my own personal thought, but if we can save Oracle, maybe we'd get a little closer to destroying Inti."

"Ohh." Rose nodded. "Oracle's Paradigm Revolution? So you want to use that to change the stage to an Ocean and put out Inti's flames?"

"Y-yes. I didn't know the name of the technique, but I'd heard that Oracle had that kind of special attack." He sighed. "But it turns out the Sun God's flames can't be put out with water, so I don't know how well that would work."

"It's true that Inti's flames can't be put out with water. So then why, if you know that?" Rose asked.

"Um." Haruyuki tried to give shape to his vague, fragmented thoughts. "Even if water's ineffective against it, I think Inti definitely doesn't like water. I mean, it's never shown itself when the Unlimited Neutral Field is an Ocean or a Storm, right? I feel like the key to an attack is in that somehow."

"Hmm. Makes sense. Amaterasu and I have talked about strategies for Inti, but we eliminated water right from the start. We might need to go see Rudra at some point, too," Rose muttered as though talking to herself, and then she shook her head slightly before staring once again at Midtown Tower.

"Right now, this tower's more important than Inti. We can't get near the roof, but there are a number of openings on the exterior walls. We might be able to get in through one of those."

"Huh... Can't we take down the Enemy on the roof?" he asked.

"That's probably the Legend-class Enemy, Einherjar. He was moved from the Valhalla dungeon to this place. There's no way we could defeat him—well, I won't go that far, but he is a relatively tough opponent. And I don't want to make a commotion before we find Orkki."

Haruyuki was hearing these two names for the first time, further piquing his interest, but he held himself in check since this was no time to be distracted by such things. "I understand. But given that, it seems like there will also be tamed Enemies inside the tower. Since

the Luminary can tame several simultaneously but there's only one on the roof, that probably means they don't want to make the building stand out to any observers. And it's still not certain that Oracle's in Midtown Tower."

"That's true," Rose agreed. "But I believe in the guidance of my Flower Divination and my bond with Orkki. At the very least, there's *something* in that tower if such a high-level Enemy is being made to guard it... An important something for Oscillatory's plan."

There was no need for further discussion. Nodding deeply, Haruyuki turned his focus back to the chalky tower. "Okay. So then we'll go inside somewhere on the outside wall. I think somewhere as high as possible would be best."

"Right. But if we get too close to the roof, Einherjar will notice us. I'm pretty sure the tower is two hundred fifty meters tall." She paused thoughtfully. "I've got it. Aim for somewhere about a fourth down from the top."

"Roger that." Haruyuki took a deep breath before spreading his wings and cutting his thrust to approach Midtown Tower in a silent glide.

There were random openings on the walls of the skyscraper-turned-temple, just like Rose said. If this were a Steel or Purgatory stage, they would have had a bit of work finding an entrance, so he was grateful for Rose's powerful luck in drawing a Moonlight stage as he went around from the west side of the tower to the north at a low speed.

About a fourth of the way from the top of the northern wall, there was a midsize opening. When Haruyuki indicated it with a hand, Rose nodded silently, so he dropped altitude to below the roof and approached, avoiding the eyes of the Enemy. Using up his special-attack gauge so that there was just barely 5 percent remaining, he decelerated and flew in through the opening to land.

He immediately searched their surroundings, but there was no sign of anything moving. He let out a breath and started to stand up.

"You can put me down already."

He heard these words and realized he was still holding Rose bridal-style. The Haruyuki of a short while ago would have reflexively yanked his arms in and dropped her to the floor, but he narrowly averted that tragedy now and squatted down to let her feet touch the ground.

"Thanks, Crow," Rose said as she stepped away and crossed her arms in front of her body. With a metallic squeal, countless spikes sprang up once more, and she took on her original thorny form.

Maybe it took her a lot of painful work to be able to pull in and push out those thorns, like the Black King and her "hands"... As this

and other thoughts passed through his mind, Haruyuki looked around.

They were standing in the middle of a path that stretched out to both sides along the exterior wall. The interior wall was also white marble, and if Haruyuki and Rose hit it with everything they had, they could have broken it, but the spectacular noise would have drawn in new Enemies. For the time being, they would have to follow the terrain as they went about their search.

“Let’s find stairs first,” Rose suggested. “I think the fact that the flower petals were sucked into the roof means there’s something to find high up in the tower.”

“Right,” he agreed. “I’m pretty sure the main body of the ISS kit that Kuroyukihime and the others destroyed was on the forty-fifth floor of this building around the portal. How about we aim for that first?”

“Got it. I’ll take the lead; you keep an eye on our rear.”

They nodded at each other, and then started running south down in the corridor.

Tokyo Midtown Tower was fifty-four stories tall, and since they had come in around a quarter of the way from the top, their current position was somewhere around the fortieth floor. It was only five more to the forty-fifth, and they could hop up that in a flash so long as they could find the stairs. And if they found Orchid Oracle there, it would be a piece of cake to leave through the portal on the same floor.

As he prayed to the gods of the Accelerated World that Oracle would be there, Haruyuki chased after his thorny guide.

After about twenty meters, the wide corridor bent to the left. Rose stopped at the corner and pressed her back against the wall before peering out ahead. She pulled back in and murmured tensely, “There’s a large hall roughly twenty-five meters ahead, and an Enemy—Einherjar—is standing there. That’s probably where the stairs are, too, but there’s no way we can slip by without it noticing us.”

“Um,” Haruyuki said. “Is this Einherjar like those knight-type Enemies that were guarding Eterna—I mean, EG? I’ve fought those before.”

“Oh, you’re talking about the Beast-class Enemy Variangan,” she told him. “It’s also a powerful foe, of course, but Einherjar’s three times stronger. Still, after coming this far, we’ll just have to figure something out. Fortunately, the Einherjar guarding this tower has a weak point it doesn’t normally have.”

“Huh?” He was a little freaked by the idea of something three times stronger than those knights, and just as he was about to ask what this weak point was, he realized it himself. “R-right. The

Luminary crown. If we can destroy that, we can check the Enemy's movement for a bit."

"Exactly. That said, though, it definitely won't be easy." She paused briefly. "To keep it from running wild, one of us will have to stop it from moving while the other destroys the crown in a single blow. And we can't use Incarnate techniques since that'll draw in the Einherjars from the other floors."

"A single blow... without Incarnate?"

Pressing his back against the marble wall next to his guide, Haruyuki tried to remember the Einherjar he had caught a glimpse of in the shadows on the roof. Size-wise, it wasn't super big, two meters tall at most. But if it was triple the strength of the knight Enemy he'd fought at Eternal Girls' Academy, then they were in for a difficult encounter. Unfortunately, it would be hard for Haruyuki to stop the movement of an opponent like that for even a second.

"I might be able to do the destroying part," he said.

Rose turned a slightly doubtful gaze on him. "Really? Even if it looks delicate, it's still part of an Arc. It's got fairly high endurance."

"I—I know..."

In fact, when he tried to destroy the crown controlling Metatron's first form, he'd had to hit it dozens of times with a striking hand reinforced with Incarnate. But the Haruyuki of today could borrow the power of another Enemy of the same Legend class as Einherjar—no, an Enemy in a position even higher, one of the Four Saints.

"I can do it. I'll definitely do it," he said, clenching his hands into fists.

"Got it." Rose nodded slowly. "Then I'll leave the destroying to you. I'll keep it from moving... But since I can't use Incarnate, I think I'll only be able to stop it completely for three seconds."

"That's plenty," Haruyuki declared, and gave a quiet voice command. "Equip Metatron Wings."

A pure white light pierced the ceiling of the temple and generated new wings on Silver Crow's back. Seeing the white wings, sharp like swords, Milady's eye lenses widened and she let out a sigh.

"That... Those are the Archangel Metatron's wings. I didn't know you had a trick like that up your sleeve."

"I try not to use them except for when I really need to, but I think now is one of those times, so..."

"....."

After a couple seconds of silence, Rose said in an even quieter voice, "I amend my statement."

"Wh-what statement?" He cocked his head to one side curiously.

"Back in Orkki's hospital room, I said I didn't need you. Having you with me's a real lifesaver. Alone, I—"

Haruyuki raised a hand to stop Rose from continuing. "You can tell me all about that once we rescue Oracle. Let's go."

"Right."

They nodded at each other and took a deep breath in unison. Then Rose kicked off the floor and flew into the corridor around the corner.

Instantly, he heard the echo of metal clanging in the distance, followed by heavy, hard footsteps. Haruyuki also flew out from their hiding spot and stared into the depths of the corridor.

The Legend-class Enemy Einherjar was a fearsome sight, almost like an apparition clad in jet-black armor. A physical manifestation of darkness writhed inside of the helmet, and only the eyes shone bright like blue will-o'-the-wisps. In its left hand was a banged-up kite shield, in its right, a longsword that was missing chunks. But Haruyuki knew instinctively that if he got hit with that blade, it would easily send the limbs of even a metal color like Silver Crow flying.

Rose confronted the fierce charge of this Enemy, who was commonly referred to as a God of Death, head-on. She raised a hand and called at the minimum possible volume, "Ornate Skewering!!"

The rose-colored light that jetted out from her feet raced across the floor at a tremendous speed and slammed into Einherjar.

Keeeeeee!! Dozens of red vines stretched up from the ground and tangled around the apparition. Once they had clambered quickly up to its head, needle-sharp thorns shot out of the vines with an even shriller sound and plunged into the knight's armor.

"Now!" Rose shouted, but Haruyuki was already bringing down the hand he had high above his head.

"Ektenia!!" His left Metatron Wing turned into a ray of light and bolted across the space, heading straight for the silver crown digging into Einherjar's helmet.

"Vaaarrrrraaaaa!!" The knight emitted an earsplitting howl and pulled up its arm. The myriad thorns gouging into it ripped away from its armor, and a red damage effect gushed from the wounds this left behind. The Enemy appeared not to feel any pain as it raised its sword to repel the light of his attack.

"Just a little... more!" Haruyuki brought down his other hand and fired his right Metatron Wing. This time, it didn't fly in a straight line, but arced around Einherjar's left shoulder, and after just barely scratching the wall, it turned sharply and collided with the silver crown from the Enemy's blind spot.

Destruction thundered down as the countless hooks that had formed the crown shattered into pieces and fell to the floor before melting away.

Instantly, the will-o'-the-wisps inside Einherjar's helmet vanished, and it dropped its head like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

When the rose vines suspending its body disappeared, it plunged to its knees.

“Run!” Rose shouted, and Haruyuki kicked off the floor.

The Einherjar was still motionless, but Haruyuki knew in his gut that the Enemy would reboot quickly and, freed from the Luminary’s control, it would come after them. If he could summon Metatron, she might have been able to deactivate it like she did at EGA, but he had no intention of disturbing her slumber at Fufuan until her recovery was complete.

Racing along, they were about to cut past Einherjar when the Enemy groaned.

“Vaar...”

Ice shot through his veins, but Haruyuki suppressed his fear and ran even faster, with the help of thrust from his wings. He had almost overtaken Rose, so he reflexively reached out and grabbed her slender wrist. They made it into a massive hall, and he saw a large staircase on the right. He ran up it without even a nanosecond of hesitation.

When he looked back toward the landing, Einherjar had disappeared, but Haruyuki couldn’t bring himself to slow down. He kept racing up the stairs, taking them three at a time, toward the next floor. Fortunately, there was no sign of an Enemy here, so he wound around to the next staircase and kept moving upward. Forty-second floor, forty-third...

“E-enough! Stop!” Rose called out from behind, when they had passed the forty-fourth floor.

“Oh... S-sure.” He slackened the speed at which he’d been running and stopped on the next landing. At once, his body turned to lead, and he nearly slumped to the ground. But before his knees could touch the floor, his comrade yanked him up by the hand, and he just barely managed to stay on his feet.

When he looked up, Rose Milady was staring down at him with a look on her face mask that was half-exasperated and half something else. “Honestly. You’re a weird one, Silver Crow. There I was thinking you were nervy enough to go and slice into your ally, aka me, then at the last minute, the light spins around, turning into a highly precise, pinpoint attack. And then you flee the scene so hard and fast that you eventually collapse.”

“Th-that’s... I’m sorry...”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she told him. “That was a fine attack. And my restraint wasn’t firm enough, so the thing bounced back your first attack. And yet you immediately launched a second. I was surprised.”

“I-it wasn’t because I didn’t have faith in you,” he protested. “I just sort of lashed out in a trance, honest.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Looking exasperated once more, Rose glared up at the stairs. “So up ahead is the forty-fifth floor, the area in question. There might be another Einherjar stationed there... In that case, we might actually have to defeat it this time.”

“I guess so,” Haruyuki murmured and began to rack his brain intently for ways to defeat that terrifying death-god knight. But then he abruptly remembered Rose’s restraint technique and asked, “That reminds me. That special-attack Ornate Skewering is a lot like the Incarnate technique you hit me with in the Territories—um, Secret Garden, right?”

“Nice memory.” She smiled faintly. “Yeah. Secret Garden’s the upgraded version of that special attack.”

“Those rose vines clamped down so incredibly tightly, I couldn’t move at all,” he told her. “I know that Incarnate techniques would draw in Enemies. But there’s a portal on the forty-fifth floor. If we do find Oracle, maybe it would be okay to use Incarnate techniques at that point? We could stop Einherjar from moving and jump into the portal with Oracle.”

“That’s... true.” Milady nodded slowly and then looked back at him. “Our only choice from here is to adapt on the fly. If just restraining it’s enough, then I won’t hesitate to use Secret Garden. But...”

“But?” he repeated.

She shook her head. “No, it’s nothing. We should get moving.”

“Okay.” He thought he saw something like concern flit across Rose’s face, but it quickly disappeared, and in its place a firm resolve bloomed.

Still holding his hand tightly, she gave it a yank and began climbing the few remaining stairs with a cautious step. After the Archangel Metatron attack mission three weeks earlier, Haruyuki had gone to Eternal Girls’ Academy to rescue Niko after she was abducted by Black Vise, so he hadn’t been a part of the fierce battle with the ISS kit main body that Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai had fought here at Midtown Tower. He’d heard all the details once the dust had settled, but this was the first time he would see the forty-fifth floor and its portal with his own eyes.

Of course, the stage attribute was different—last time, it had been the endless dusk of a Twilight stage—so the interior design of the building would have been different, too. But the fundamental structure should have been the same. The forty-fifth floor was a large hall, and the portal was at the back. Even if there was a new Einherjar guarding the hall, if Rose could hold it for ten—no, five seconds, it wouldn’t be too hard to escape into the portal. Everything hinged on whether or not they could find Orchid Oracle before they were

targeted.

He suddenly had a new idea and stopped his companion with a whisper. "Um, Rose?"

"What?" She looked over her shoulder at him.

"Before we charge in there, how about you try using Flower Divination one more time?" he suggested. "I think even just knowing Oracle's approximate position would increase the probability of our success a fair bit."

"That's true." Standing two steps above him, Rose nodded and then quickly shook her head from side to side. "But unfortunately, I used up basically all of the special-attack gauge I charged at the hospital on that Skewering back there. I could charge it up somewhat if I destroyed the wall, but I don't want to make any loud noises."

"Oh... I see. Right." Now that she mentioned it, Haruyuki's special-attack gauge also had less than 20 percent remaining. It had charged up however much when he'd destroyed Einherjar's crown, but he felt the same anxiety. In a normal duel, his gauge would have gradually charged while he was punching and getting punched, but in the Unlimited Neutral Field, unless you actively charged your gauge every chance you got, you were likely to end up in a tight spot when push came to shove.

But there was no point in crying over spilled milk. They would just have to win with the cards in their hands. That was a basic principle of Brain Burst, whether it was a normal duel, the Territories, or the Unlimited Neutral Field.

"I know I said this before, but all we can do is pick up the fight where we come out," she told him. "We decide to prioritize movement above all else and keep moving by improvising. Crow, you beat me. You can do this."

"I also said this before, but I don't think that I beat you or anything." He paused briefly. "And what is this impro-whatever?"

He could practically see her eyes rolling beneath her avatar. "Off the cuff. Ad lib. You're good at that kind of thing, right?"

"I'm not especially good at it or anything. But I'll do my best. Once we get into the hall, we find Oracle and carry her out the portal. Even if there is an Enemy, we avoid it or restrain it as much as we can, avoid fighting whenever we can. That's the plan, right?"

"Yes. If I could add anything," she replied, "put saving Orkki before me. If I tell you to go on ahead, you go through that portal with Orkki without another word."

"B-but..." Haruyuki was about to say that he could never do that. But Rose Milady's eye lenses housed an even more serious light than when he faced her in the Territories, and he couldn't offer any further protest. Instead, he said simply, "I'll do my best."

“I’m counting on you. Okay... Here we go.” Rose Milady turned around and started to race up the final twenty or so steps.

When they finally reached the forty-fifth floor, it was the same as the one below in terms of layout and corridor design, but for some reason the air felt noticeably cooler, and Haruyuki shivered.

There was no sign of an Enemy in the passage cutting across the stairway hall. But he saw large double doors on the wall directly ahead, and beyond them was probably the great hall and the portal. Most likely, Orchid Oracle was being held somewhere inside.

Silently nodding at each other, they cut across the stairwell hall and moved to the door. He tried pressing the side of his helmet to the chilly marble surface, but he couldn’t hear any sound from inside.

Doing the same thing on the left side, Rose shook her head briefly and then pointed at the doors—a sign that they would just have to open it since they couldn’t hear anything. Nodding, he put his right shoulder and left hand up against the marble. Rose held up three fingers, and folded her middle finger and index finger. The instant her thumb went down...

“Nngh!” Haruyuki shoved the door forcefully.

The thick marble shuddered and began to swing inward, creaking sonorously. *Quiet!* he shouted in his heart, but there was no talking to this inorganic opponent. Rose, pushing on the other side, also sent her eyes racing to their rear, an anxious look on her face. If an Enemy heard this squealing and appeared on the stairs, they would have no choice but to split up, and he absolutely did not want to do that.

A few tense seconds passed until the doors were open wide enough for them to pass through alongside each other. They quickly slid inside, and he checked what they were up against as he pressed his back against the door.

It was big.

The entire floor was a single hall—it looked to be thirty meters wide and fifty meters deep. There were a dozen or more narrow windows in the walls, and the moonlight drew a striped pattern on the floor. Directly ahead of them, in the back of the hall, was an elliptical shape pulsing a pale blue, the portal. They just had to reach that to escape this tower with its wandering ghost knights.

But almost as if to prevent them from doing so, a black shadow stood in a daunting pose immediately in front of the glowing orb. Inky black armor, silver crown on its forehead—a tamed Einherjar. Unlike the individual they had fought on the fortieth floor, this one had a tattered cape on its back and a thorny iron ball with chains in its left hand instead of a shield—a morning star. The longsword in its right hand was also significantly larger.

“Commander class!” Rose cried with a groan.

Haruyuki continued to scan the room in search of Orchid Oracle, and his eyes went to the center of the right wall—where he saw a human shadow at the base of a wide, floor-to-ceiling pillar.

Bound to the pillar with abnormally thick chains wrapped around it from head to toe was a figure slightly smaller than himself. He could just barely catch a glimpse of slender limbs and parts of the torso in the gaps in the chains, but in the reflected light of the moon, he couldn't make out the armor color or shape.

But given the situation, he had to assume it was Orchid. Haruyuki turned to Rose and hissed, "I found her!"

"I see her!" Rose yelped at exactly the same moment. However, she pointed not at the right side where Haruyuki had found his Oracle but to the wall on the left.

He hurriedly trained his eyes in that direction and found a single avatar wrapped in chains at the base of an identical pillar on the opposite side. The size was basically the same as the avatar he'd found.

"Huh?!"

As Haruyuki let out a cry of surprise, Rose noticed the other prisoner bound to the pillar on the right.

"What's going on?!" she groaned.

Unconsciously, Haruyuki gripped her hand. "We've got no choice but to get them both out! I'll cut the chains of the avatar on the right, so you take the left—"

"No, it's impossible." A deep anguish and frustration bled into her voice. "Those chains have an abnormally high priority. Even if we used Incarnate, we wouldn't be able to break them easily. And while we're trying, the Enemy will start to move."

Clenching his teeth beneath his mask, Haruyuki looked at the commander Einherjar camped out in front of the portal. They seemed to be just barely outside of its aggro range at present, but if they took a few steps toward either of the imprisoned avatars, he had no doubt that it would react immediately and charge them.

"Wh-what should we do?" He stood rooted to the spot, and Rose squeezed his hand, hard.

"We'll just have to fight."

"What...?" He stared at her.

"We defeat the Einherjar and then cut the chains. There's no other way to save Orkki." She frowned. "Although I don't know which one's Orkki."

"I... guess you're right."

It was true. There was no other way. They *could* leave the tower temporarily, go back to the real world through another portal, get a battle party together, and then attack anew. But the moment they'd

destroyed the crown of the Einherjar on the fortieth floor, the Oscillatory side was made aware of their entry into the building. When they next visited this place, the tower might be an empty shell, or the Seven Dwarves might be lying in wait, in addition to the Enemies. He had to assume that this was their only chance to rescue the girl.

“Understood. We’ll fight. What about Incarnate techniques?”

“I don’t want to use them if possible. Hang on until you just can’t.”

“Roger.”

Once they had come to a bare-minimum understanding, Haruyuki released her hand and reached down to his left hip, before murmuring a new voice command, “Equip Lucid Blade.”

A platinum light grew in his left hand, which then concentrated to produce a slender longsword.

Seeing this, Rose smiled faintly. “The sword you cut me with, hmm? I’m counting on it to have the same bite now.”

Rather than replying in words, Haruyuki slowly drew his sword.

They nodded silently at each other once more, and then sprang into action.

Four days earlier, Haruyuki had fought massive warrior Enemies inside the Castle. He had been joined in battle by Trilead Tetroxide. The warrior status had been equivalent to Beast class, but even so, if he'd eased his focus even the slightest bit, he would have taken a direct hit from one massive blade or another and died instantly. Now, too, he had by his side a high ranker as reliable as Lead, but his foe was of a higher order than the warrior Enemies in the Castle, a Legend class. Normally, this sort of opponent was fought with a group of ten or twelve people.

So before Haruyuki even attempted his attack, he felt like he was more than aware that this was not an opponent to be trifled with. But a mere five seconds after the battle began, he was forced to understand that this awareness had been far from enough.

“Vraraaaah!”

With a fierce roar, the iron sphere came plummeting down and grazed Haruyuki's shoulder before hitting the floor with explosive force, digging a deep hole.

“Nngh!” Staggering, he used the wings on his back to dodge chunks of marble spreading out like buckshot. Even though he hadn't yet taken a direct hit, three moments of the briefest contact had eaten away more than 10 percent of his health gauge. And he hadn't landed a single attack of his own even once.

Rose was similarly forced into a difficult battle handling the greatsword in the Enemy's right hand, its main weapon. Like Haruyuki, she had managed to avoid any direct attacks, but just the pressure of the slicing blade caused damage, so she couldn't easily approach the knight. Her main weapon was the thorny whips that grew from both hands, allowing her to attack with a greater reach than Haruyuki—in fact, she'd landed several direct hits, but these had only increased the number of scars on the commander Enemy's thick armor and taken nothing but a few pixels from the four-bar health gauge. To break through the guard of such a fierce opponent with physical attacks, they would need to aim for the armor seams or peel

it off somehow.

“Vrrar!” the Einherjar howled, seemingly annoyed by these diminutive foes who kept bouncing around. It swung its sword hand and the morning star outward in huge arcs. Haruyuki and Rose immediately dashed backward, but when the two slammed into the ground, the cracks and shock waves rippled out, beating at their armor and scooping their legs out from under them. Another 5 percent of his health gauge was carved away.

“It’s only gonna get worse like this...,” Rose muttered.

“If we destroy its crown, it’ll stop moving,” Haruyuki said quickly.

“It’ll just stop for a mere five, six seconds; there’s no way we can cut away all four of its gauges in that time. And I feel like this one and the Einherjar on the fortieth floor move just a bit slower than normal. The taming by the Luminary probably dulls their reactions.”

“S-so then... if we destroy the crown, it’ll get stronger,” he groaned.

As if hearing his despair, the commander-class Einherjar froze, its arms still lowered, and then ploddingly roused itself. Two will-o’-the-wisps flickered with pale light inside the helmet.

A Legend-class Enemy. Except for the Four Gods, the Super-class Enemies who guarded the four gates of the Castle, they were the most powerful presence in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Even Metatron, Amaterasu, and the other Saints were categorized as Legend class in terms of rank. They were the rulers of the Accelerated World, who had turned countless Burst Linkers into death markers from time immemorial.

When did I get so arrogant? Charging Suzaku’s gate at the Castle over and over, destroying Metatron’s first form, I started to see even Legend class as easy pickings. Even though all of my victories were because I had someone else’s help.

Belatedly becoming aware of his own powerlessness, Haruyuki started to hang his head, but Rose whacked him on the back.

“Crow, it’s fine to be afraid, but Burst Linkers don’t give up. This guy really is strong—stronger than I thought. But we still have a chance.”

“A chance... How?” He stared hard at her.

“Einherjar’s a warrior spirit that causes death. There’s a soul somewhere in the chest area of the armor. We can take it down in a single blow if we destroy that. I didn’t tell you at first because the strategy’s impossible to carry out without a powerful gun,” she said. “But you of all people can cut through that armor. If you can make even just a tiny hole, I’ll pull that spirit out.”

“I...” Haruyuki shook his head back and forth. “It’s impossible. I can’t even get anywhere near its arms and legs. Cutting its chest is

just...”

“I’ll create an opening for you. Do or die. I’ll use Secret Garden. But if the roses that bloom are a color other than red, blue, or yellow, you drop everything and run for the portal.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to the side. “What happens if it’s some other color?”

“No time to explain... It’s coming!”

Einherjar’s roar drowned out Rose’s voice. “Vraaaaaaa!!”

It brandished its greatsword and morning star high in the air and started to run at an incredible speed. Haruyuki half bowed to the intensity of it, but Rose braced herself in a wide stance and threw her hand up in the air, whip tucked away.

“Secret Garden!” she shouted.

A crimson overlay jetted from the rose-red avatar, even more saturated than her armor. Instantly branching out along the marble surface, the red light materialized a garden of green leaves along the floor. Countless vines stretched up at the charging Einherjar’s feet and tangled around its black armor. The knight lost its balance, but didn’t stop its advance. Ripping up the vines with sheer power and sending leaves scattering, it closed in on Haruyuki and Rose. In another five steps, she’d be within range of the greatsword. Four, three, two...

Then teardrop-shaped buds swelled up all over the vines snaking ever upward around the knight’s neck. They burst open without a sound and brilliant yellow petals dazzled his eyes.

Yellow!! Go!!

Shouting these words at himself, Haruyuki pushed aside his hesitation and fear and flew forward with everything he had. Jumping high with the aid of his wings, he brandished Lucid Blade in both hands. His target was a point on Einherjar’s chest armor.

But.

Haruyuki’s eyes flew open at a thoroughly unexpected situation.

When he’d severed Glacier Behemoth’s horns and Rose Milady’s spikes, the logic had been one of concentrating his cutting force on a single minuscule point. By carefully catching the tip of the horn or spike with a sharp blade, he increased the power generated at the point of contact to maximum, which made it so that his sword would slide right through.

But Einherjar’s armor was composed of nothing but smooth, curved surfaces, with not a single tapered area to be found. Haruyuki’s still-nameless sword technique couldn’t find a strike point.

What should I do? Cut in the middle, sink or swim? No, that’ll definitely be bounced back. Just one spot is enough, a place where I can concentrate my force... I have to look for the seam...!

The speed of his thoughts and sensations reaching their limit, the

flow of time eased. The air increased in density and viscosity, almost like a liquid, while his field of view narrowed and everything was dyed blue.

Where? Where? Where where where where where where...

—You still have a long way to go if you search now for the place to cut, Silver Crow.

He heard a voice abruptly and whirled his head around, dumbfounded. But his body wouldn't move. The massive bulk of Einherjar swinging its greatsword filled his field of view; he could see nothing else.

—Your reasoning of laying miniscule on maximum is correct. But Crow, that is nothing more than the starting point of our sword school, Omega style.

O-Omega style? Who exactly are you?

In the midst of essentially frozen time, Haruyuki called out to the mysterious voice he'd heard any number of times before.

—I? Our name is Centaurea Sentry. However, for thee, this name may be more familiar. The third Chrome Disaster, 'twas I.

What?! Further dumbstruck, Haruyuki groaned in his thoughts. Th-the third? The one struck down by Blue Knight?

—You make us recall such unpleasantries. I will tell you. I let Knight have that glory. It matters not, Silver Crow. You wish to cut down that monstrosity, yes?

I—I do, yes. But I can't find the armor's seam.

—Then you still have a long way to go. It is time for you to proceed to the next stage. The minuscule is an infinitesimally small point. Be it thorn or horn, it is easy to discover the minuscule at the tip... But think. No matter how gentle the curving line, so long as its curvature is nonzero, there can only exist one point of contact with the straight line. That is precisely the minuscule point. Come now, an infinity of this "seam" lies before you.

... S-so then what about when the thing you want to cut is completely flat or indented?

—At that time, you will cause me further trouble as your instructor. But for now, focus on the enemy before you. Einherjar's armor is hard and thick. But given that it is curved, it is possible to find the minuscule there. You need simply have absolute faith and swing your blade.

Absolute faith? How...?

—Believe in yourself. You are the lone successor to the most powerful sword technique, praised as the ultimate evil, the Omega-style Whole Blade.

With these words, the mysterious voice finally disappeared.

I don't remember signing up to be the successor to some weird sword technique! But he couldn't spare the time to shout at the voice in the void, as the flow of time began to accelerate once more. His blue field of view gradually regained its color. The viscosity of the air decreased, and the liquid turned back into a gas.

“Vraaaaaaar!!” The commander Einherjar brandished its greatsword, ripping out the vines wrapped around it.

The yellow roses blooming all over the Enemy's body shot out a dazzling electric shock as the petals scattered. An ocean of sparks writhed and crawled over the armor and brought the knight to a halt, the effect of Rose Milady's Incarnate technique Secret Garden. Haruyuki had been hit with the red roses, which did physical damage with the thorns, but apparently, the yellow roses generated an electrical attack.

I will definitely take advantage of this moment!

“Aaaaaah!!” With a sharp battle cry, Haruyuki brought down his blade.



The tip touched the part of the jet-black chest armor that rolled up the highest. He pulled the resolution of his perceptions up to the maximum and concentrated his power only on the point where blade touched armor.

Cut the minuscule with the maximum.

The resistance that was communicated to his hands changed from slight to great in an instant and then back to slight. Rather than the shriek of metal, he heard a woody sound like bamboo splitting, and Lucid Blade ripped five centimeters into the thick chest armor to come out directly below the gash. About 10 percent of the first level of the Enemy's health gauge vanished. Considering that it had a total of four, this was meager damage.

But something snapped past him from behind, grazing his shoulder as it started to drop—Rose's whip. The needle-sharp tip stabbed into the slight gap carved into Einherjar's chest armor and was immediately yanked out again.

The roses then scattered, taking the electric shock with them, but the Enemy remained with its sword held high, unmoving. Landing on the floor, Haruyuki ripped his gaze away from Einherjar's massive bulk and turned to his partner.

A burning blue flame was caught on the tip of the whip extending from her left hand. The weak point she mentioned—it had to be the Einherjar's soul flickering there. When Rose waved her hand forcefully, the whip screamed and hit the ground, and the blue flames scattered into countless tiny sparks.

Haruyuki timidly looked forward again, in time to see the Enemy's health gauge vanish, all the way down to the fourth level.

The Legend-class Enemy, the commander of the Einherjar, crumbled to the floor, its jet-black armor breaking apart.

"We... won?"

He stared dumbly at the pile of armor slowly melting into the air, unable to believe their victory.

"There's no time for slacking off!" Rose shouted, coming around in front of him and pointing at the pillar on the right side of the hall. "You save that duel avatar, Crow! I'll take the left!"

"R-right!" He nodded deeply and shifted gears. Their objective wasn't to defeat Einherjar. They had to rescue Orchid as soon as possible and get her through the portal.

Still gripping his sword, Haruyuki raced across the floor, now devoid of green leaves.

Even a meter away from the pillar, he couldn't tell if it was Oracle or not wrapped in those thick chains. He would have to cut through

them first to find out who lay beneath, so he brandished his sword and set his aim. They looked seriously tough, just like Rose had said, but they couldn't have been harder than Einherjar's armor.

"Fah!" Letting out a sharp breath, he brought Lucid Blade down, but it simply bounced back with a dazzling shower of sparks, leaving nothing more than a faint scratch on the surface of the chain.

"H-huh."

Frustrated, he tried another few blows, but the results were the same. He felt like the third Disaster aka Centaurea Sentry was sighing somewhere, and he stepped back from the pile of metal for a second.

It wasn't about force or speed. The secret of Omega style was to sever the one point that *could* be severed. As long as he could pick out the seam, at its most extreme point, there would be no need to even bring the sword down... supposedly.

He relaxed his shoulders and gently set the tip of Lucid Blade on the iron chains. Sensing the minuscule point of contact, he imagined the sword sliding through it...

Shf. The blade sank into the chain and came out directly below it.

He returned his sword to its scabbard and pulled on either side of the cut. The super-high-priority chain still resisted, but eventually the circle fell apart with a high-pitched squeal, and then the whole thing dropped to the floor with a loud clatter.

"Orkki!!"

Haruyuki heard a cry that was almost a shriek from behind him and hurriedly looked back. Straining his eyes, he saw Rose kneeling at the base of the pillar holding a pink avatar in her arms. Her trademark hat was missing, but the large ribbon at the chest and the dress-shaped armor were without a doubt those of Orchid Oracle.

Thank goodness.

Relief washed over him.

So then who's over here?

Doubt came to him next. Haruyuki turned back around. His jaw dropped.

Now freed from the chains, what leaned against the pillar was a dull silver color, slender limbs sprouting from a cylindrical torso—a robot.

But robotic-looking duel avatars weren't that rare. In a grander sense, the majority of duel avatars, including Silver Crow, could have been said to be robot-style designs. But common to all duel avatars was the fact that inside their multicolored armors, there was a gray nude body, the naked avatar. Even Aqua Current, who looked like her entire body was made of flowing water, was no exception.

And yet the robot before his eyes now had a torso and joints made up of nothing more than metal frames and cables. He saw no sign of

any naked avatar. It was an absolutely impossible design for a duel avatar.

“Um... Who *are* you?” Haruyuki asked ever so hesitantly as he looked at the robot’s face, and he was hit with a new shock.

On its simply designed head—it looked like the robot was wearing a hood—sat a circlet of countless silver hooks linked together: the Luminary crown he’d seen a number of times in this tower, digging in tightly. Maybe that was why the robot avatar didn’t respond to him, but in that case, this meant that the Luminary’s fearsome ability Divine Light demonstrated the power to control the minds of not only Enemies but even Burst Linkers.

“What the—? Is that a drone?”

It was Rose who had spoken. He looked behind himself abruptly.

She was standing there, holding Orchid Oracle lovingly in her arms. Oracle’s armor was badly damaged, but there was no crown on her head.

“Uh, um, is Oracle all right?” Haruyuki hurried to ask. “Is she conscious?”

“She’s not.” Rose shook her head. “Because she’s forcibly connected with Cerberus’s quantum circuit right now. But if we go into the portal, we’ll burst out properly and the real-world Orkki should wake up.”

“Sh-she should? That’s a relief. So then please go on ahead of me, Rose. I don’t know who this is, but I’ll help them before I—”

“That’s not a person—or rather, not a Burst Linker.”

He gaped once again and asked timidly, “Huh? S-so then is it an Enemy?”

“Not that, either. That is a drone,” she declared. “In other words, a shop clerk. An NPC of the Unlimited Neutral Field. You’ve never been to a shop?”

“N-no, I haven’t. Kuroyukihime forbade it...” Haruyuki stared at the silver robot once again.

Not an Enemy nor a Burst Linker but an NPC. Now that she mentioned it, this harmless design did indeed fit that mold. But the mystery only deepened. For what purpose would Oscillatory Universe tame a shop clerk and then lock it up in a place like this?

“Um. So a clerk means it’s not dangerous, right?”

“So long as we don’t attack it,” she agreed. “Although it’s not a rival and has no health gauge, so there’s no point in attacking it, anyway.”

“Then I can take the crown off its head, right?” Haruyuki asked, and Rose thought for a second before nodding.

“I think that’d be okay.”

“Okay then...” He drew Lucid Blade and brought the tip up to the

hooks of the crown. Since it would have been stronger than it looked, he focused his mind again on the minuscule and severed the object's seam.

Ting! He heard a faint noise, and the severed hook fell to the floor. The remaining parts followed, clattering to the floor and disappearing.

"Hey, Silver Crow?"

Haruyuki looked back as he sheathed his sword. "Y-yes?"

"I wondered this when you sliced me, and when you cut into Einherjar's armor back there," she said. "Did you learn that technique on your own? Or did Lotus teach it to you?"

"Uh," he hesitated, briefly. "Kuroyukihime has taught me so much, but..."

But actually, he apparently had another teacher of the sword arts, the mysterious master of Omega style, Centaurea Sentry. But he wasn't sure whether he should say the name or not. Because Sentry himself had said that he had been the third Chrome Disaster. If anyone found out that Haruyuki could communicate with the third Disaster, who had to have lost all his points in the distant past, they might suspect that some element of the monster still remained inside of Haruyuki.

"Crow. Are you maybe...?" Milady took a step forward, and then there came a curious sound from behind him.

"+ - + + + - + ...?"

It sounded like electrical noise, but was also clearly some kind of speech. Having rebooted, the robot/drone was talking to him. Semicircular eye lenses blinked with white light in the depths of the hood as it continued to speak to Haruyuki.

"+ + + - + ...?"

Naturally, he had absolutely no idea what it meant.

"It is asking if you are the one who helped it."

"Huh...?!"

Haruyuki shifted his gaze to Rose and asked, "You understand what this person is saying?"

"Well, I wouldn't have made it as a Burst Linker for this long otherwise. You should probably answer it."

"B-but I don't speak drone...," Haruyuki murmured as he turned back to the robot and said in Japanese, "Y-yes, it was me who broke the circlet on your head, anyway."

"+ + + - + + + + +"

"It says 'Thanks,'" Rose interpreted again.

"O-oh, you're welcome," he hurried to say. "But... What are you doing here? Why did they capture you?"

The drone spread its slender arms like a human being would. Rose continued to turn the electronic noise into a language he could

understand.

“When I returned to Tokyo after being away for a while, I ran into a pointy white avatar. After I carried out his order, I found this strange thing suddenly attached to my head, and I couldn’t move.”

“Pointy... and white.” Haruyuki frowned. “I guess that would have been Ivory Tower.”

“Probably,” Rose agreed. “In which case, I guess he bought something from this drone. So then why lock it up here?”

Of course, Haruyuki had no answer for her. He looked at the drone again and thought a bit before asking, “What kind of shop do you run, anyway? What do you sell?”

“+ + + - + + + - + +, + - + - + - + +”

Rose changed the drone’s electronic sounds into Japanese.

“I’m the wandering blacksmith, Mr. Smith’—Huh? Blacksmith?! The legendary—?! It really exists?!”

Haruyuki’s shock was about three times as great as Rose’s.

The blacksmith roaming the Unlimited Neutral Field. The most critical factor in their strategy for attacking the Sun God Inti, the shop that Nega Nebulus—no, the general membership of the five Great Legions—was scheduled to look for until their eyes bled was standing right in front of him.

In which case, it was easy to guess what a duel avatar that looked like Ivory Tower had asked the blacksmith to do. He had enhanced the Luminary to resist heat so that it wouldn’t melt in Inti’s flames. And to keep any other Burst Linkers from doing the same, he used the newly improved Luminary to take control of the blacksmith, brought the shopkeeper here to Midtown Tower, and held it captive together with Oracle.

“Uh, um... Ummm...” Not sure of what he should say, Haruyuki flapped his mouth open and closed.

The drone—or rather, Mr. Smith—made its electronic noise once more.

“+ - + - + + + ? + - + + - + + + + -”

“It’s asking if you want to place an order. Otherwise, it’s going to start traveling again...”

“A-an order,” Haruyuki murmured before moving his head up and down on a return trajectory at lightning speed. “I—I do. I do, I do! I want to request a weapon enhancement!”

He’d gotten that far when he remembered.

At the meeting the day before, they had decided that the weapon they would enhance at the blacksmith was Trilead Tetroxide’s Arc Infinity. But Lead wasn’t there now. Haruyuki could go back to the real world through the portal, contact Lead, have him dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, meet up, and come to this place once more...

In theory, it was possible, but even if Lead responded immediately, a full day or more would probably pass in inside time. As to whether or not the blacksmith would wait here for them until then...

His hopes weren't high, but Haruyuki started to open his mouth to at least ask.

"This is bad." Rose stopped him before he started, her voice tense as she turned her face toward the large doors, still holding the unconscious Oracle. "Enemies coming up the stairs. Three—no, more than that. They're reacting to my Incarnate technique. Crow, if you're gonna ask the blacksmith for something, we're out of time."

"Unh... Unnnnh." After agonizing for another second, Haruyuki made his decision. They might be able to find the blacksmith again, or this might be their last chance. In which case, it wasn't what the Legion had planned, but his only choice was to act now.

He thrust forward the Lucid Blade still clutched in his right hand and shouted, "Please! Enhance this sword, please!"

"+ - + - + - + + + - + +"

When the blacksmith drone emitted its electronic noise, a purple window appeared before Haruyuki's eyes. The row of characters—apparently a weapon enhancement menu—was in Japanese, fortunately. Physical attack enhancement, endurance enhancement, heat attribute addition, corrosion performance enhancement... He found the thing he was looking for fairly near the bottom of the scrolling list.

"Th-this! This heat invulnerability, please!"

OK

At the top of the enhancement menu, a new smaller window popped up. Barely bothering to check the sum of Burst Points displayed in it, he was about to press the OK button when he froze.

"Huh?" Blinking rapidly, he stopped to count the number of zeros with his index finger.

He didn't have enough. He didn't have anywhere near enough.

Currently level six, Haruyuki had been saving up a fair number of Burst Points to reach the high-ranker level of seven. His promised duel with Takumu would recede into the distance, but if it was for the sake of the Inti subjugation mission, then he was fine with pouring all of those points into this enhancement. He was prepared for that, and yet, the number of points Mr. Smith was asking for was nearly three times what he currently possessed.

This is ridiculous! he raged, but when he thought about it, it was also ridiculous to make a weapon invulnerable to flames. If he considered it calmly, this might have been an appropriate price, but that didn't matter if he couldn't pay it.

Grasping at straws, he was about to ask the blacksmith if he

accepted installments, but before he could, Rose peeked at the window.

“Whoa, that’s some price!” She whistled. “Oh, but flame invulnerability. Yeah, that’s gonna cost you. And I mean, why would —?” She started and then paused briefly before continuing. “No, it’s obvious. To destroy Inti. In that case, I can’t pretend I’m not a part of this.”

“Huh?”

Before a dumbfounded Haruyuki, Rose shifted Oracle so she could hold her with just one arm and reached her free hand out to the window.

“I’ll pay it for you.” She had no sooner spoken than she was pressing the OK button.

He heard the *cha-ching* of purchase made, and all the windows disappeared.

“Huh? B-b-b-b-but that crazy price...!”

“We’ll work that out later. Hurry up and give him your sword! We have less than a full minute before those Einherjars get up here!”

Her voice was harsh, and he had no choice but to obey. He held out Lucid Blade once more, and the blacksmith accepted it casually with one hand before kneeling down formally on the spot for some reason.

Haruyuki heard a cool sound as the robot’s lower body transformed. *Kashnk shnk shnk*. Into a square worktable—no, an anvil. Then its right hand also changed shape. A steel plate rotated and pushed out to produce an enormous hammer about twenty centimeters in diameter.

“+ - + + + + +”

Saying something in its electronic language like “I’ll get to it then,” the blacksmith set Lucid Blade on the anvil and brought down the hammer with a haphazardness that could almost have been called violent. *Clang-clang-clang!* Each time the metallic sound rang out, starry sparks scattered and bounced off the floor before disappearing. Haruyuki watched on tenterhooks, wondering if this process ever failed—or failed spectacularly to the point where the weapon was lost. The star-sparks that flew out from the tenth blow were even more remarkably brilliant.

Lucid Blade was enveloped in crimson light. He almost had to turn his face away, the light was so dazzling, but he kept his eyes intently fixed on the process. The light gradually grew weaker and at last disappeared.

“+ - + + + - + + -”

Together with an electronic “Sorry for the wait,” his beloved sword was returned to him, and Haruyuki timidly accepted it.

It looked basically the same as always. But the way the light hit it, it seemed like the blade shone just the faintest hint red. He couldn't immediately believe that this would really hold up against Inti's super heat, but he had no way of checking at the moment.

There was the pleasing *kashnk* again, and the blacksmith returned to its human shape. It looked at each of them in turn, made some sounds in the way of a farewell, and then flames jetted from its feet. With this propulsion, it flew across the hall, slipped out a window, and disappeared off into the distant night sky.

"Uh, um... Thank you!" Haruyuki called after the blacksmith before bowing his head deeply toward Rose. "Thank you, too, Rose. Really. I think it'll take a while, but I'll definitely pay back the points you put up for me—"

"Here they come!" she shouted sharply before he could finish.

With a tremendous, explosive roar, the hall's double doors slammed open. Writhing in the darkness beyond were four or five Einherjars.

"Run!" she yelled and started sprinting for the portal at the end of the hall, while Haruyuki hurriedly chased after her.

Behind them, the deadly warriors made the ground rumble in their pursuit. He didn't have the leeway to look back, but the bloodlust of the Enemies snaked out like a tentacle and tried to entangle his avatar. Mustering the last of his mental focus, Haruyuki caught up with Rose, grabbed onto her and Oracle tightly with both hands, and beat his Metatron Wings.

As he accelerated to the point where his entire body squealed in protest, the blue portal approached before his eyes.

He flew in.

Everything turned white.

Smelling disinfectant and flowers, he slowly opened his eyelids.

The first thing he saw was a pair of obsidian eyes peering at his face from a mere thirty centimeters away. Unable to say anything, he simply met her gaze.

The pale lips moved, almost trembling, as their owner cried faintly, “Haruyuki.”

Tsubomi and Haruyuki had been in the Unlimited Neutral Field for just under an hour. Given that they were prepared initially to spend over three days there, they had been able to achieve their objective surprisingly fast, but the three and a half seconds since they dived had no doubt been painfully long for Kuroyukihime.

“Kuroyukihime.” Feeling something hot welling up in his chest, Haruyuki was about to continue. But he didn’t manage to get any words out, because Tsubomi leapt to her feet and yanked out the XSB cable in his Neurolinker. He pulled the other end out of his own as he quickly stood up.

Tsubomi leaned over the bed as though the other two didn’t even exist and stared intently at Megumi. Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime stood next to her.

She continued to sleep.

There was no expression on her face, which was beautiful enough to elicit a gasp. Her breathing, too, was extremely quiet, and if the flimsy blanket hadn’t moved faintly up and down, it would have been easy to wonder if she were alive at all.

Five seconds. Ten seconds.

Megumi still did not wake up.

Rose had definitely leapt into the portal holding Oracle. At that point in time, Megumi should have burst out and her consciousness been freed from the quantum circuit. And yet. Why?

“Megumi,” Kuroyukihime murmured and gently held the hand that was poking out from under the blanket. “Come back, Megumi. You saved me in Okinawa. So this time I want to save you. I want you to be free of everything that’s torturing you so we can laugh together again. So...” Perhaps having no other words, she bent over and

pressed her forehead to Megumi's hand.

Meanwhile, Tsubomi slowly straightened up from where she was leaning over the bed and took a step, then another back. As if unable to accept the fact that Megumi was not waking up, she shook her head slightly.

In a trance, Haruyuki stepped in between them and placed one hand on Kuroyukihime's back and grabbed Tsubomi's hand with his other. "It's okay. I'm sure she'll wake up. I just know it was Wakamiya who called Rose's divination flower petals... So, so... I know..."

Then he felt the air in the hospital room shudder gently. Someone's voice echoed from a distance, quietly, kindly.

Come on now, Orkki. It's time to wake up...

Haruyuki saw the long lashes lining the closed eyes tremble.

Slowly, so slowly, the eyelids lifted.

The dappled light streaming through the lace curtains shimmered in her light-brown eyes. They blinked once, twice... and one more time.

A glance, to Kuroyukihime. From barely parted lips, a breathless voice spilled out. "... hime..."

Head hanging low, Kuroyukihime's shoulders jumped. Slowly, bit by bit, she lifted herself up. The instant she saw Megumi's face, she shuddered once more. "Megumi."

The other girl smiled like a flower coming into bloom. After nodding gently, she shifted her gaze. She looked straight at Haruyuki and said, "Thanks," as though she understood everything that had happened in the Accelerated World.

Moving further, the eyes turned to Tsubomi. A puzzled look came over her pale face. But that, too, was only for an instant.

"Milady... Rosie?" Megumi said, and then repeated it as though she had gained an absolute confidence. "Rosie. We finally meet..."

Haruyuki shifted his gaze to look at Tsubomi standing to his left. Her face was blocked by her hair, so he couldn't see her expression. But from the hint of jaw that he could see hung a transparent tear. It fell soundlessly to the floor. Followed by another. And another.

"... Orkki," she said finally.

Tsubomi stepped over her fallen tears to throw herself onto the bed. She pressed her face to Megumi's chest and howled weakly, quickly turning into the wails of a child. At some point, Megumi's face had also become wet. Holding the weeping girl tightly to her, Megumi nodded repeatedly through a teary smile.

Haruyuki wiped roughly at his own eyes with a clenched hand and looked out the curtained window.

Although the weather report said the day would be overcast, he could see a slice of blue sky peeking through a gap in the clouds.

Taking a step back, Kuroyukihime placed a hand on Haruyuki's shoulder. It seemed there was no need to say anything, so he simply enjoyed the gentle warmth of that hand as he gazed intently at the turquoise-blue sky.

To be continued.

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 23: Kuroyukihime's Confession*.

Once again, I have made you wait a tremendously long time. It was eleven months from Volume 21 to 22, and this time, I did pick up the pace just the teensiest bit, thinking to bring this to you in ten months. But the fact remains that it's still a volume a year, so I'd like to further accelerate going forward.

About the content, I'm sorry here as well! In the afterword of the previous book, I wrote that there would be a resolution with the White Legion in the next volume, but I didn't even defeat the Sun God Inti, much less White. This is because I did manage to get in the story of Kuroyukihime's birth, which I'd felt I had to do at some point. But the Inti part also progressed somewhat, so in Volume 24, I will fulfill expectations and the fight begins... or it's supposed to. But it seems like everyone in White won't just sit back and watch...

A little more about Kuroyukihime. I do tend to tack things on after the fact, but the tale told in this volume was something I'd decided on when I was writing Volume 1. Kuroyukihime has a tendency not to take care of herself, and even though she was critically injured, hospitalized and near death, her parents never came to see her—the revelation in this book is the premise behind this. But when I was serializing the story in Volume 1 on the website, I had no intention of writing the rest once that volume was finished, so I never dreamed the time would come when these facts would be told through Kuroyukihime's mouth. The fact that I made it this far is thanks to all of you who have been rooting for *Accel World* for nearly ten years now. It isn't clear whether the conclusion to the series is near or not, but I will continue to work toward that goal going forward. I'd ask that you please keep cheering me on!

Now, then!

My recent doings for a little filler... is what I thought, but I have

absolutely nothing to write about! I have no funny stories! I wanted to go on a long tour on my motorcycle at least once in the first half of this year, but before I knew it, it was the Incandescent stage outside, a harsh season for bikers. I managed to purchase a model that I've wanted for many years now at the end of last year, and I'd thought to go whizzing down the street when it got warmer, but then it was too warm... I'm certain that I'll absolutely go when fall comes, but in the blink of an eye, it will be winter. If there is something you want to do, don't say "someday"—if you don't do it soon, you'll lose the right moment forever!

And while I write about this and that, I've lost the right moment for apologizing. I am truly grateful to HIMA for creating such wonderful illustrations to complete every volume. Thank you as well to Miki and Adachi, whom I inconvenienced greatly schedule-wise once again! I'm going to work harder in all kinds of ways for Volume 24!

Reki Kawahara
On a certain day in July 2018

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